

THE PREACHING OF JOHN DONNE, WITH AN INVESTIGATION  
OF ITS MYSTIC AND POETIC ELEMENTS AND  
THEIR PLACE IN THE TASK OF PREACHING

---

A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the  
School of Theology at Claremont

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Theology

---

by  
Robert Newell Schaper

June 1973

*This dissertation, written by*

ROBERT NEWELL SCHAPER

*under the direction of his Faculty Committee,  
and approved by its members, has been presented to  
and accepted by the Faculty of the Southern California  
School of Theology in partial fulfillment of the re-  
quirements for the degree of*

DOCTOR OF THEOLOGY

*Faculty Committee*

Chairman

E. L. Trites

F. Thomas Trites

*Date*

June 1973

F. Thomas Trites

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	iv
 Chapter	
I. THE PATH TO THE PULPIT . . . . .	1
Donne's Early Life . . . . .	1
Donne's Poetry . . . . .	21
Donne's Conversion . . . . .	35
II. THE HOMILETICS OF JOHN DONNE . . . . .	56
Donne's Preaching Career . . . . .	56
Craftsmanship . . . . .	82
Use of Scripture . . . . .	97
Theology . . . . .	116
III. POETIC VALUES IN DONNE'S PREACHING . . . . .	120
Metaphysical Poetry . . . . .	121
Metaphysical Wit . . . . .	123
Imagery . . . . .	126
Other Poetic Elements . . . . .	145
Synthesis . . . . .	156
IV. MYSTICISM IN DONNE'S PREACHING . . . . .	162
V. DONNE AND CONTEMPORARY PREACHING . . . . .	168
Biblical Content . . . . .	169
Metaphorical Expression . . . . .	174
A Comparison . . . . .	182
CONCLUSION . . . . .	188
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	193

## INTRODUCTION

Preaching is an activity that is open to examination in at least two separate areas. There is a discipline of homiletics, a measurable and objective analysis. Every preacher has his own way of constructing and delivering sermons, and it is of continual interest to explore these differences and similarities, especially in the work of representative craftsmen. Certain men affect the thinking of their own and subsequent times in significant ways, and it is to such men that we turn as models for exemplary homiletical principles.

Another area from which it is possible to survey the preaching of a man is the artistic. This is far more subtle and subjective. It must be proper to regard preaching as an art, but the analysis of that which makes any given effort artistically worthy is terribly difficult. This is true in preaching as a communicative art, caught up as it is in matters literary and aesthetic, impossible to explore in depth because of its existential quality. We must add in this subjective dimension the whole consideration of moral and spiritual effectiveness and significance. If we define preaching as an event which requires both an auditor and his response in order to complete its full reality, further subjectivity is introduced. There



is an element of response present in all understanding of art, but in preaching this response is extended beyond simple affirmation or negation to change and continuation.

What, therefore, becomes the task of this investigation of the preaching of John Donne? I was impressed that Donne was a craftsman with enough of his work preserved that his homiletical skill could be analyzed with a measure of benefit. The appearance of the complete set of Donne's sermons by the editorial work of the late George R. Potter of the University of California and the eminent scholar of seventeenth-century English literature, Evelyn Simpson, meant that Donne's preaching was now readily available for review. There can be no question of Donne's place in the history of Anglican preaching.

I was also drawn to investigate the relationship of Donne as a poet to Donne as a preacher. During the twentieth century there has been a renewed and continuing interest in Donne as a poet of the metaphysical school. I wished to explore what effect his early genius as a poet can be found to have on his preaching. This must also be approached cautiously, for when the investigator is looking for something, he is very liable to find it. However, the poetry of Donne, though not prolific, is nevertheless distinct enough as an art form to be recognizable in his prose, especially in the way by which he

approaches a subject.

Above all, there is the hope of deriving from such a study some further understanding for the task of preaching. Certainly many things fall away through changes of time and culture. Yet the means whereby the Dean of St. Paul's moved his auditory to respond in obedience and faith to the Gospel is of value to the homiletician today. Regardless of the charisma which may give to preaching the reality of true communication, the discipline of sermon structure and the creative and effective use of language are matters of constant evaluation and instruction.

## CHAPTER I

### THE PATH TO THE PULPIT

#### Donne's Early Life

The preaching of John Donne is a matter of particular intrigue because it came late in his experience. His ministry did not begin until he was forty and lasted only sixteen years. It is also safe to assert that his name and genius would be recognized in the world of literature today if he had never preached at all. That he did preach is unusual, and that such preaching was a reflection of many influences in those first forty years is part of our investigation.

In order to understand Donne at all, it is most necessary to look with some degree of detail at the winding path to the pulpit which he took. For much of this material we are indebted to his first and friendliest biographer, Izaak Walton. Walton was a close acquaintance of Donne's in later years and was obviously completely captivated by what he called the "variable, virtuous life" of the poet-preacher.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Izaak Walton, Lives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 82.



reasonably handsome estate. His mother was a descendant of Sir Thomas More, and her influence on Donne had to be considerable, since she never renounced her Roman Catholicism. A glance at her predecessors reveals the strength of her Roman Catholic heritage.

Of the above, Clements was a physician; John Rastell, a lawyer; William Rastell, a judge; and John Heywood, a man of letters, a dramatist and musician. Donne's uncle, Jasper Heywood, was a poet, translated some of the Tragedies of Seneca, and became the Superior of the English Jesuit Mission. The family suffered for its Romanism. Jasper was banished from England, and one of John's brothers, Henry, was arrested in May, 1593, for harboring a suspected Roman Catholic seminarian. He died in Clink prison.<sup>3</sup>

Donne's education began at home with a private tutor. This continued until he was ten, and it would be assumed that this was under a Roman Catholic instructor. Walton quotes an observer<sup>4</sup> as predicting concerning the boy, "This age hath brought forth another

---

<sup>3</sup>William Mueller, John Donne, Preacher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 9. In what must be a typographical error, Mueller says that Henry was arrested in 1573. All other sources say 1593.

<sup>4</sup>Edmund Gosse, The Life and Letters of John Donne (London: Heinemann, 1899), I, 14. Gosse suggests Uncle Jasper as the source of this statement.

Pico della Mirandola."<sup>5</sup> Donne had mastered French and Latin by age eleven and was then sent (October, 1584) to Hart Hall at Oxford.

There is indication that Oxford was at this time a favorite place for those of Roman persuasion.<sup>6</sup> However, matters were not so lenient as to allow the conferring of a degree without the Oath of Allegiance to the Queen as supreme governor of the Church, and no Papist would accede to this if it could be avoided. It may also be noted that Oxford was the center of Spanish studies in England, and it is not too difficult to discover such influences in Donne.<sup>7</sup> The great Spanish mystics were contemporary to this time: St. Teresa died in 1582, Luis de Granada in 1588, and St. John of the Cross in 1591. One interesting evidence of this Spanish strain is the motto found with the first portrait of Donne, "Antes muerto que mudado." Walton translates this strangely (probably a faulty memory of what he had "once seen"), "How much shall I be chang'd, Before I am chang'd," and applies this to the dramatic difference between the gay young soldier and the mature Dean of St. Paul's.<sup>8</sup> Gosse is

---

<sup>5</sup>Walton, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>Charles Monroe Coffin, John Donne and the New Philosophy (New York: Humanities Press, 1953), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup>Gosse, I, 17.

<sup>8</sup>Walton, p. 79.

more accurate. "Before I am dead, how shall I be changed?" Grierson calls this phrase a "lover's motto," and translates it, "Sooner dead than changed."<sup>9</sup> Grierson also notes that in 1623 Donne tells the Duke of Buckingham that there are more Spanish books, whether of poetry or theology, in his library than of any other language.<sup>10</sup> There are at least eighteen Spanish medieval and renaissance commentators quoted by Donne in the sermons and other prose works.<sup>11</sup>

Donne transferred to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1587. The polemics here were presumably shifted from the confrontation of Rome and Canterbury to the differences between Canterbury and Geneva.<sup>12</sup> There would certainly be supplied to Donne even more of the apologetical material which he would eventually wield with such force.

There is great difficulty in establishing anything but the most rudimentary of structures for Donne's life during the decade of the 1650's. Walton does mention that following Cambridge, Donne came

---

<sup>9</sup>John Donne, The Poems of John Donne (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. xvii.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>John Donne, The Sermons of John Donne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), X, 387-401.

<sup>12</sup>Coffin, p. 33.

to London about 1590 and then was admitted to the study of law at Lincoln's Inn. It was most appropriate for him to study at Lincoln's Inn. Several of his forbears, including Sir Thomas More and William Rastell, had belonged to the Society. Though Donne never attempted to practice law, the associations and friendships of Lincoln's Inn influenced him throughout his entire life. Christopher and Samuel Brooke, who shared Donne's poetic tastes, and Rowland and Thomas Woodward were his friends there. He also met Thomas and John Egerton, the sons of Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper. Nor was life confined to the routine of studies. He presented himself and became familiar with the court, and had obviously come to know Whitehall and Westminster. Some consider the period at Lincoln's Inn largely wasted.<sup>13</sup> Donne may not have seemed serious in his studies, yet this was very possibly the prevailing attitude of a majority of his confreres. This did not mean an idle mind, for he demonstrated keen interest in a wide range of reading and study.

The 1590's were marked by rather extensive travel for Donne, although the exact time for these constitutes a problem. Donne himself recounts visits to Paris and Germany, and Walton speaks quite clearly of a proposed visit to the Holy Land which was

---

<sup>13</sup>R. C. Bald, John Donne (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 78.



aborted and resulted instead in a visit to Italy and Spain.

The time that he spent in Spain was at his first going into Italy designed for travelling to the Holy Land and for viewing Jerusalem and the Sepulchre of our Savior. But at his being in the furthest parts of Italy, the disappointment of Company, or of a safe Convoy, or the uncertainty of returns of Money into those remote parts, denied him that happiness: which he did often occasionally mention with a deploration.<sup>14</sup>

Walton implies that these travels were after his expeditions with Essex. This seems unlikely. Donne claimed on March 1, 1602, to have served Lord Egerton for four years. He returned from the Azores in October, 1597, so barely six months remain for travel far too extensive for that short amount of time. Grierson opts for the period immediately after Cambridge, 1590-91, and follows Jessopp in assuming that Donne, like his college friend, Henry Wotton, went abroad after leaving the university.<sup>15</sup> Grierson further speculates that Donne made the trip with some idea of entering the priesthood, but that Italy and his own bursting indulgence throttled the desire and brought him back to England with other plans.

In a scholarly essay,<sup>16</sup> John Sparrow rejects this date

---

<sup>14</sup>Walton, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup>Donne, The Poems, p. xvi.

<sup>16</sup>John Sparrow, "The Date of Donne's Travels," in Theodore Spencer (ed.) A Garland for John Donne (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), pp. 123-151.

by assuming that the portrait of 1591 was painted in London, and that Donne had to be in Thavies Inn for about a year prior to entering Lincoln's Inn in 1592. He finally settles on an eighteen-month period of 1595-96, immediately prior to Donne's Cadiz expedition with Essex. Sparrow does admit to the possibility of the earlier date, especially by bringing into question Donne's attendance at Cambridge, which is mentioned only by Walton, and, as Sparrow ingeniously shows, is mistakenly presumed confirmed by the register of Oxford. Yet this early date would have Donne touring at fifteen or sixteen years of age, and this seems highly unlikely. Additional implications against this are also derived from some of Donne's poetry and his statements about his career following his stay at Lincoln's Inn.

In 1596 Donne went on a naval expedition with the Earl of Essex and Lord Howard of Effingham. These commanders rallied volunteers for such a venture, and since Donne's old friend of Oxford days, Henry Wotton, was one of Essex's secretaries, there was no problem in getting access to the opportunity. Most young men who signed on to such a voyage were seeking booty. Donne probably hoped for such, although his reference to this in "The Calme" bears a cynical ambivalence:

Whether a rotten state, and hope of gaine,  
Or to disuse mee from the queasie paine  
Of being belov'd, and loving, or the thirst  
Of honors, or faire death, out pusht mee first,  
I lose my end.

After some delays, the ships sailed to the Spanish port of Cadiz, captured the city, plundered it and some nearby towns, and returned to Plymouth. Almost a year later, in July of 1597, a second fleet of over a hundred ships set sail, but almost immediately encountered a violent storm and had to return to shore. This event is commemorated by Donne in "The Storme." The expedition was anything but a fiscal success, and finally straggled back to England at the end of October, 1597, after some minor conquests in the Azores. Essex went to Ireland in 1599, but by this time Donne had found a new career.

Two of Donne's companions on the Islands expedition had been young Thomas and John Egerton. Their father had become the Attorney General in 1592, had advanced to Master of the Rolls in 1594, and in 1596 had been made Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England. Through the good offices of his friends, Donne received appointment as secretary to the Lord Keeper. Such a position was in reality an opportunity for advancement in service limited only by ability. Others who served Sir Thomas attained significant rank. Walton notes that Egerton did not account Donne "so much his Servant, as to forget he was his Friend; and to testifie it, did alwayes use him with much courtesie, appointing him a place at his own Table, to which he esteemed his Company and Discourse to be a

great Ornament."<sup>17</sup> Egerton's official duties were varied and impressive. He presided over the Upper House of Parliament and acted as intermediary between that body and the Crown. As Master of the Rolls the entire responsibility of the Court of the Chancery was his, and Donne must have been close to him in all these activities. There were frequent meetings of the Privy Council, and the Court became a most familiar place.

Perhaps the full weight of Egerton's influence on Donne is not easily appreciated. Gosse considers it immense and writes,

I do not question that the most important influence to which Donne was ever subjected was that of Egerton, and that to the great sobriety of this lawyer we owe the radical change in the poet's outlook upon life and men.<sup>18</sup>

The comparative paucity of material from or about Donne at this time makes this "radical change" somewhat obscure.

In October, 1597, Sir Thomas had made a second marriage to the widow of Sir John Wolley, the daughter of Sir William More. Her only son, Francis, was being brought up with the children of her brother, Sir George More, at Losely. In exchange for her brother's kindness to her son, Lady Egerton brought to her new household

---

<sup>17</sup>Walton, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup>Gosse, I, 66.

Ann More, then about fourteen. We do not know when Donne first fell in love with Ann, but his prospects, whenever this occurred, were dim, since his meager income and lack of any possessions made him totally unacceptable to Sir George More.

When Lady Egerton died in 1600, Ann returned to her father's home at Losely. She and Donne had no doubt pledged their fidelity, though she was only sixteen, but they had no real prospect of being together again. Donne toiled on as Secretary to the Lord Keeper. By a complicated process he was sent to Parliament for its brief meeting of 1601. This was the last significant development in his career as Egerton's secretary. At that time, Ann More came back to London with her father, and it was not long before they secretly met once again. Other meetings followed, and they became more convinced than ever of the depth of their love and the despair of ever obtaining the consent of Ann's father for their desired marriage. So, in the impassioned path of countless star-crossed lovers, they were married secretly. The ceremony took place about three weeks before Christmas, 1601, although the exact date and place is unknown. Christopher Brooke gave away the bride; his brother, Samuel, performed the ceremony, and Donne later observed that there were no more than five persons present. In around two weeks Parliament dissolved and Ann returned with her father to Losely.

In nothing is the power of Donne's passion so tragically demonstrated as in the hasty and unadvised manner of this marriage. It was drastically to alter his career, and bring anxieties and difficulties almost beyond bearing. Not until his entrance into the Anglican ministry did he have anything remotely approaching a stable or self-fulfilling life. The years after his marriage were years of wearing penury and humiliating dependence. It can be assumed that from this crucible of struggle and disappointment a greater and more compassionate cleric emerged, but it is certainly possible to conceive of shorter paths to ministerial usefulness. In fact, the abject attempts to gain patronage through the most obsequious and insincere extravagances were themselves hurdles to the ministry he finally entered.

This parade of sorrows begins with the fear-filled notification of Sir George More of his daughter's secret marriage. This took place in February, 1602. It could have been nothing but disaster. The marriage of a minor was a specific offense against the canon law and an impossible breach of the social code that involved families in the arranging of marriages. One must add to this the passionate and notoriously bad nature of Sir George. Time was passing, no opportune moment came, so Donne, now ill, sent a letter of confession at the hand of Henry Percy, ninth Earl of Northumberland. The

letter was not the best work of reconciliation, although the format of such a work was probably unattainable. Sir George flew into a rage, went immediately to the Lord Keeper, and because of the violation of canon law, had Donne and the two Brookes clapped into prison. He also pressed hard for Donne's dismissal from Egerton's service. Lord Egerton hesitated for a while, reminding Sir George of the possibility of rash action. However, choler fed by envious gossip prevailed, Sir George continued pressing for dismissal, and the Lord Keeper finally relented. Sir George was eventually to regret this, especially in view of the hardship that would thus come to his daughter, but at this time he probably anticipated success in annulling the marriage.

Meanwhile, Donne implored his father-in-law by letter from prison for mercy. He finally succeeded in gaining release to return to his lodgings in order to recover from his illness. By March 1 his friends were released also. Now it was apparent that the marriage would not be annulled and that reinstatement of Donne to his position with the Lord Keeper was most necessary. Sir George began seconding the appeals of Donne for his old position, but now the Lord Keeper was adamant. He recognized Donne's worth but felt it inconsistent "to discharge and readmit servants at the request of passionate petitioners." It was probably after this that he wrote the

famous "sad letter to his Wife" which concluded after his signature with the pun, "John Donne, Anne Donne, Un-done."<sup>19</sup>

Sir George finally surrendered his daughter to her husband, but with the bad grace of cutting off all her support, so Donne found himself unemployed, impoverished, and with a young wife to provide for. Aid came to them in the form of a house at Pyrford on the estate of Francis Wooley, a cousin of Ann's. They were to live there for three years. Two children were born to them, Constance, in 1603, and John, in 1604. Walton notes that Donne spent his time studying canon and civil law.<sup>20</sup> This was not all that he did. Friends came often and there was an active correspondence. It must have been difficult to watch the advancements experienced by those whose talents he knew well, and knew not to exceed his own--Thomas and John Roe, Henry Goodyere, Thomas Coryat, John Hoskins, Francis Bacon, Robert Cotton, Richard Baker and Walter Chute. All were receiving honors denied to Donne. Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, but

---

<sup>19</sup>Walton, p. 29. In a lengthy footnote, Bald, p. 139, denies that Donne wrote it at all, since it did not appear in the earlier editions of Walton. Yet it is so obvious a witticism that it would undoubtedly come from almost all observers at the time, including Donne. It must have been around in disgusting repetition for all of Donne's life in some form or other.

<sup>20</sup>Walton, p. 35.



it was certainly no time to expect preferment from the new monarch, James I, who must have known well the story of John Donne's marriage.

This period closes with a visit to the continent by Donne in company with Sir Walter Chute. On February 16, 1605, a license was issued for such a journey. He was probably gone for a little over a year. He visited Paris and finally came to Venice, where he most likely visited Henry Wotton. When he came back to England in the spring of 1606, he probably took his family back to Pyrford for a short time. However, by the end of the year he had moved to a small house in Mitcham, where he was to reside until 1611.

These next five years are difficult to follow because of the complexity and number of documents. He was in London about as much as he was in Mitcham. He studied laboriously on canon law; wrote poems to great ladies and theological pamphlets for the King; he cultivated patrons and relaxed in the company of writers; and he begat four more children in these five years. This made the family life filled with problems of illness and general disorder. On one occasion he writes from my "hospital at Mitcham." He himself was ill frequently. The period is one of continuing uncertainty. He was a "Goethe without a Weimar,"<sup>21</sup> learned in law and not a lawyer; a

---

<sup>21</sup>Gosse, I, 155.

profound, or reasonably profound theologian, yet not in orders; possessed of many friends in high places, but no post in court.

The primary activity of this period centers around Thomas Morton. This gentle, tactful, and studious cleric was to become Dean of Gloucester and finally Bishop of Durham. His great work was as an apologist for Anglicanism against Romanism. In 1605 Morton published Apologia Catholica and Conspiracy and Rebellion; in 1606, Apologia Catholica secunda pars and A Full Satisfaction concerning a Double Romish Iniquitie. These were all literary efforts to confute the Papists, who were refusing to attend Anglican services. Not to attend was an illegal act, and Morton sought to show the Catholics that it was morally and ethically unnecessary. It is generally assumed that Donne was assisting Morton in these endeavors, and this is the assertion of Jessopp and is taken up by Gosse.<sup>22</sup> However, there is no direct evidence for this other than the intimate acquaintance of the two and the story of the offers made by Morton to Donne to encourage him to enter the priesthood.

Morton was made Dean of Gloucester in 1607, and according to Walton, immediately offered a benefice to Donne. Walton quotes Morton in a very tactful but forceful statement urging Donne to accept this benefice and give up his quest for court favors and

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, I, 149.

other employment. Morton suggests a period of prayer and fasting before reply should be given. Three days later Donne returned with a lengthy answer which read in part:

Sir, my refusal is not for that I think my self too good for that calling, for which Kings, if they think so, are not good enough; nor for that my Education and Learning, though not eminent, may not, being assisted with God's Grace and Humility, render me in some measure fit for it: but, I dare make so dear a friend as you are my Confessor; some irregularities of my life have been so visible to some men, that though I have, I thank God, made my peace with him by penitential resolutions against them, and by the assistance of his Grace banish'd them from my affections; yet this, which God knows to be so, is not so visible to man, as to free me from their censures, and it may be that sacred calling from a dishonour. And besides, whereas it is determined by the best of Casuists, that God's Glory should be the first end, and a maintenance the second motive to embrace that calling; and though each man may propose to himself both together; yet the first may not be put last without a violation of Conscience, which he that searches the heart will judge. And truly my present condition is such, that if I ask my own Conscience, whether it be reconcileable to that rule, it is at this time so perplexed about it, that I can neither give myself nor you an answer. You know, Sir, who says, Happy is that man whose Conscience doth not accuse him for that thing which he does. To these I might add other reasons that dissuade me; but I crave your favour that I may forbear to express them, and, thankfully decline your offer.<sup>23</sup>

A question may be raised as to the genuineness of this account of Donne's words, since they are probably from Morton when he was quite old. Bald suggests that Walton is embellishing through Donne's thought expressed in his poem, "To Mr. Tilman," a later work reviewing for a young divine the significance of his ordination.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup>Walton, pp. 34-35.

<sup>24</sup>Bald, p. 207, fn. 2.

But all this is not to make the incident a fiction. Morton probably urged upon Donne such an action more than once. Whether Donne had scruples about entering the priesthood because of his past life or was still undecided about Anglicanism or still cherished hopes of preferment in court is open to question. It must be admitted that Donne's search for state employment during this time was avid.

Perhaps it should be noted here that there are at least three incidents of such attempts known during the residence at Mitcham. In June of 1607 he asked Sir Henry Goodyere to approach William Fowler, the Queen's secretary, on his behalf, but there seemed little hope that this would be productive. In November, 1608, Donne sought a secretaryship in Ireland, brought about by the death of Sir Geoffrey Fenton. His intermediary was Lord Hay, but the King remembered the sad events of Donne's marriage and refused the petition. The third attempt was in February, 1609, to be preferred to be a secretary of Virginia. Several of Donne's friends were members of the reorganized Council of the Virginia Company and he must have hoped for an appointment, but it was denied.

The period at Mitcham is marked by an interesting literary production. The first is an odd work, written in 1607 or 1608, Biathanatos, "A Declaration of that Paradoxe, or Thesis, that Self-homicide is not so naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise. Wherein the Nature, and the extent, of all those Lawes which seeme

to be violated by this Act, are diligently surveyed." It would not seem an exaggeration of Donne's dejection and depression over events at this stage of things. In the preface to this work Donne notes that he has "often such a sickely inclination." He considers various causes for melancholy and concludes that "whensoever any affliction assailes me, mee thinks I have the keyes of my prison in mine owne hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart as mine own sword."<sup>25</sup> This work was not printed in Donne's lifetime, though he "forbade both the press and the fire" to touch it. He gave a manuscript of this work to Lord Herbert of Cherbury and to Sir Robert Ker. In his letter to Sir Robert he notes: "Let any that your discretion admits to the sight of it, know the date of it; and that it is a book written by Jack Donne, and not by D. Donne."<sup>26</sup> Donne prefixed to it a list of nearly a hundred authorities quoted in the body of the work, among them being such names as Schlussemburgius and Pruckmannus, an awesome tribute to the kind of scholarship which Donne brought to his work.

Another work of this period is Pseudo-Martyr. It was

---

<sup>25</sup> Donne's preoccupation with death will be noticed in his preaching, a fact not odd when the presence of plagues and the lack of advanced medicine is considered.

<sup>26</sup> Gosse, I, 22.

written in 1610 and bears the marks of his research and study for Morton. Donne claims to work from outside theology as "no professed divine," but his arguments are forceful and martialled with care. It is not necessary to accept Walton's assertion that the book was written in six weeks at the command of James I. The book itself makes no reference to such a request. Donne did work most intensively and might have produced the work in six weeks, since his thought and study on this topic extended back for some years.

Donne sees Rome's corruption in three errors:

1. The debasing of secular magistrates and exalting of clerics.
2. Misconception of the doctrine of good works in the teaching that a man can in the eyes of God go beyond duty.
3. Purgatory.

There are twelve chapters and Donne seeks to propose that Catholics ought to take the Oath of Allegiance and that those who suffered for not doing so were not entitled to the dignity of martyrdom. Donne's tone is one of sympathy and understanding, since he was seeking to persuade the hesitant rather than convince the obstinate.

The work was published and was considered significant enough to bring Donne an honorary Master's degree from Oxford. It also served to bring more attempts to persuade Donne to enter the ministry, even from James I, which must have disappointed Donne.

Donne's next controversial work, and the most bizarre of the period, was Ignatius His Conclave, published in 1611. This was a wildly paradoxical pamphlet, a satirical attack upon the Jesuits. Ignatius is made the right hand man of Lucifer. The major places of hellish horror are given to the innovators who destroy unity and order. The Papacy is the worst offender, though Donne also includes Mahomet, Copernicus, Paracelsus and Machiavelli. The Jesuits produce such a crush of innovators that Lucifer banishes them all to a new hell on the moon and by this establishes the Lunatic Church. The contrast to all this confusion is the monarchy of England, represented by Elizabeth and James I. This work was written first in Latin, then translated into English, and enjoyed a much wider circulation than Pseudo-Martyr.

Out of this period of Donne's life prior to his taking orders comes the great bulk of his poetry, and it is to that we now give our attention.

### Donne's Poetry

There are problems present when we turn to view Donne's poetry. This is not only because of the obscurity that surrounds Donne in the early period of his life, especially before his marriage. It is also because Donne was not unwilling to cover up in later years some of the facts surrounding his poetry, and also because of the

contradictions and complexities present in Donne and his work.

As is so frequently the case, Donne wrote well and early. The period of 1590 to 1597 was one of great creativity. It is assumed that the bulk of his songs and sonnets, elegies and satires, were written during these years. Ben Jonson thinks "Donne to have written all his best pieces ere he was twenty-five years old," which would be 1597. Bald fixes the first two Satires, nearly all the Elegies and an uncertain number of the Songs and Sonnets to Donne's Lincoln's Inn days.<sup>27</sup> Obviously this period includes the "Epithalamion made at Lincoln's Inn."

Grierson includes the third Satire with its famous discussion of truth in this early period.<sup>28</sup> This is something of a clue to the constant presence of contradictory strains in Donne. The same period of time produces poetry of seduction and illicit love along with poems of profound religious contemplation.

There is an abundance of love poetry from Donne. Most of his elegies are filled with passion and scorn, and there are concentrated outbursts in the Songs and Sonnets, such as "The Apparition." Donne covers a variety of romantic themes: the fickleness of women, his own delight in change, the folly of confining love by rules and

---

<sup>27</sup>Bald, p. 77.

<sup>28</sup>Donne, The Poems, p. xxvii.



rigid relationships, sophisticated justifications of seduction, scorn of women's affected constancy.

Much of Donne's work is the straightforward statement of simple passion, e.g., Elegy XII, "I wonder by my troth," "For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love," "If yet I have not all thy love," "Oh do not die," "Twice or thrice had I loved thee," "All kings and all their favourites," "I'll tell thee now, dear love, what thou shalt do," "Whoever comes to shroud me do not harm," "Take heed of loving me," "So, so break off this last lamenting kiss."

This love-poetry constituted a break with the conventional ornaments of Elizabethan and earlier writers. There is in Donne an extraordinary realism which may well be his great original contribution to English poetry. As one writer observes:

Donne is not concerned with what Petrarch, or Ronsard, or Spenser, or the courtly Italian Platonists may have said about love: indeed, he probably thought it mostly nonsense . . . it was Donne alone who created an entirely new kind of love-poetry, and who dared . . . to say as an author what he felt as a man.<sup>29</sup>

This openness and unabashed sensuality became tempered by experience, and Donne's later poems reflect this change. Much of this is the result of his marriage and his deep devotion to his wife. These more mature works are his Elegy XVI, "Sweetest love, I do

---

<sup>29</sup>J. B. Leishman, The Metaphysical Poets (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), p. 21.

not go," "As virtuous men pass mildly away," and "A Valediction: Of weeping."

There is also an early and rather odd work that emerged just prior to Donne's wedding. This is "The Progresse of the Soul," not to be confused with a later work of very different vein but similar title. This early poem was never completed, though it seems intended as a satirical epic. Donne promises in his preface to trace the history of the soul's passage from Eve's apple to some prominent living personage who will be identified at the end of the book. As early as the seventh stanza, he writes,

For this great soule which here amongst us now  
Doth dwell, and moves that hand, and tongue, and brow,  
Which, as the Moone the sea, moves us; to heare  
Whose story with long patience you will long;  
(For 'tis the crowne, and last straine of my song.)

This "great soule" has never been satisfactorily identified. Ben Jonson probably analyzed Donne's intent correctly:

The Conceit of Donne's transformation or Metempsychosis was that he sought the soule of that Apple which Eva pulled, and thereafter made it the soule of a Bitch, then of a sheewolf and so of a woman. His general purpose was to have brought in all the bodies of the Hereticks from the soule of Caine and at last left it in the body of Calvin.<sup>30</sup>

This would make the main theme to be heresy. But even allowing this objective, the work is ill-conceived. "The Progresse of the

---

<sup>30</sup>Bald, p. 124.

Soule" may help us to understand why, with the gifts of intellectual appreciation and keen refinement perhaps unsurpassed even in that consummate age, Donne never contrived to reach what might be considered the first rank among men of letters. "The puerility of the central idea is extraordinary. . . . He had little dramatic and positively no epic talent."<sup>31</sup> However, the indictment is probably too sweeping to come from one poor work.

In fact, so diverse is the whole matter of literary criticism that it is possible to see this work as extremely significant, if not something of a watershed. This is the opinion of Richard E. Hughes, whose book on Donne uses the title of this poem.

"The Progress of the Soule" is a major turning point, Donne's recognition that paradox is not something he may administer to reality in the interest of wit, but something which resides in temporal reality. In the poem we see something very like "existential disappointment," a disappointment which penetrates into the very existence of man.<sup>32</sup>

Hughes anticipates that the rest of the poem would have presented the other half of the soul, the line of Seth, not Cain, and resolved the conflict in the Incarnation. He further assumes that this view of history is a reflection of Augustine. Yet it is dangerous to give this

---

<sup>31</sup>Gosse, I, 138.

<sup>32</sup>Richard E. Hughes, The Progress of the Soul (New York: Morrow, 1968), pp. 70-79.

particular work, so incomplete, too significant a place in Donne's philosophical and theological history.

There is also a group of rather unusual later poems. Their novelty is in their Petrarchan reproach of the cold and obdurate Laura who will not respond to this ardent lover. Included in this list are "Twicknam Garden," "Nocturnall upon St. Lucie's Day," "The Blossome," "The Primrose," "The Relique," and "The Dampe." Grierson thinks this change of attitude is because of the social status of the persons addressed. Donne no longer writes of real or fictitious commoners, but pays bold compliments to gracious ladies who are his friends.<sup>33</sup> It is assumed that the ardor of the works would be considered poetic romanticism rather than brashness.

There is great importance to the question as to whether the poetry of Donne reflects the imagination of an artist or the subtle autobiography of a man. The pendulum has swung regularly in both directions. Walton gives veiled references to a dissolute youth, but is so overwhelmed by the eventual godliness and virtue of the man that the references only serve to heighten Donne's piety. It was Gosse who began the attempt to see in the passion and profligacy of the poetry the biographical statements of the poet. The first stage of this process he sees in the opening poems of the Songs and Sonnets,

---

<sup>33</sup> Donne, The Poems, pp. xx, xxi.

which describe a butterfly of the court, indulging his curiosity and sensuousness wherever satisfaction is offered to him. Then Gosse deciphers an affair with a woman married to an invalid husband from a poem he dates 1596.<sup>34</sup> The Fifth Elegy, "His Picture," and the Twentieth, "Love's Warre," Gosse places at Donne's departure to Cadiz and the beginning of the end of this unfortunate liaison. Donne becomes scandalized over his compromise of this woman under the nose of the poor husband, confined to a basket chair. This is but one illustration of an indeterminate number of experiences of sensation and superficial emotion. At times there is the typical Petrarchian artificiality, and the ranging imagination of a rebelling and passionate youth is venting its energy. However, if one wishes to see it, there is adequate resource for the construction of a very indulgent, if not libertine, life. Gosse is so convinced of this that he regards Donne's unwillingness to publish these poems as evidence of his fear of scandal.<sup>35</sup> It is true that virtually all of Donne's poems were published posthumously, but it is also true that there were many manuscript copies shared by Donne's acquaintances while he was still living and that Donne took pains to see that they were not destroyed.

---

<sup>34</sup>Gosse, I, 66.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., I, 77-78.

The reactions against Gosse and the attempt to construct biography from the love poetry have been strong. Neither has it arisen from the sense of protection for the misunderstood preacher. Probably the most outspoken and noted critic of this approach is T. S. Eliot. He entertains grave doubt that there was any significant period of dissipation or debauching for Donne. ". . . I do not think that we have sufficient evidence that Donne was so very dissipated; we are in danger of making an attractive romance about him."<sup>36</sup> Eliot doesn't even regard the point as of much interest anyhow, and observes that it is pleasant in age to think that one was a gay dog, so that one can claim to have changed and improved. This he regards as fantasy and assumes that Donne was above all else conventional, whether as a rake or as a divine.

Others agree with Eliot. R. C. Bald notes that Gosse has ignored two important considerations. The first is expressed by W. H. Auden, "What makes it difficult for a poet not to tell lies is that, in poetry, all facts and all beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities."<sup>37</sup> Simply stated, this means that

---

<sup>36</sup>T. S. Eliot, "Donne in Our Time," in Spencer, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup>Bald, p. 6: W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 19.

the erotic love poetry "bears more the mark of the artist than of the man."<sup>38</sup>

The second consideration for Bald is the unusual gift possessed by Donne for creating a situation and presenting it vividly by means of a few, skillful, economical strokes. It is rather obvious that Donne could not, or at least, did not experience everything that is delineated in the love poetry, and that there was no problem present in his adroitly describing responses and feelings that are universal and appropriate. Bald can point out that excerpts could show Donne to be an old man, with gout and gray hair, when he wrote at the age of twenty-five or thereabouts.<sup>39</sup> He even charts this poetic heightening in Donne's religious poetry. Thus the "Hymne to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany":

In what torne ship soever I embarke,  
That ship shall be my embleme of Thy Arke;  
What sea soever swallow mee, that flood  
Shall be to mee an embleme of Thy blood;  
Though Thou with clouds of anger do disguise  
Thy face; yet through that maske I know those eyes,  
Which, though they turne away sometimes,  
They never will despise.

The drama is somewhat heavy, since prior to this Donne had endured extensive and difficult voyages and now faces only a Channel crossing

---

<sup>38</sup>Mueller, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup>Bald, p. 6, quoting Donne's sonnet, "The Canonization."

in a most seaworthy vessel. However, there is not only a kind of poetic license operating here, but the legitimate contrast between experience anticipated and experience recounted. The critical ground is extremely subjective.

The evidence from the prose work, especially the sermons, is also inconclusive. There can be no question of the confessional nature of many portions of his preaching. Consider,

I preach but the sense of God's indignation upon mine own soul, in a conscience of mine own sins, I impute nothing to another, that I confesse not of my selfe, I call none of you to confession to me, I doe but confesse my selfe to God, and you, I rack no man' memory, what he did last year, last week, last night, I onely gather into my memory, and pour out in the presence of my God, and his Church, the sinfull history of mine own youth.

This can be read almost any way one wishes. Gosse remarks that "we read Donne, however, to little purpose if we do not perceive that he was, above all things, sincere."<sup>40</sup> Yet William Mueller can say of such remarks that they "may have been no more than over-sensitive reflections about a normal young manhood."<sup>41</sup> It is possible, however, to take the sermons quite seriously, as does Gill:

But the sermons are sufficient evidence that Donne's popular reputation has firm and extensive basis in fact. The sermons are the utterance of a man who knows the world, at its most

---

<sup>40</sup>Gosse, I, 62.

<sup>41</sup>Mueller, p. 11.



problematic, from the inside, and in more devious detail than either poems or sermons state.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps a middle ground is the path of scholarly safety. No less an expert than Grierson comes closest to this view. He sees in Donne a poet of passion rather than sensuality, and the poems express an intense susceptibility to the fascination of sex, a fascination that at once allures and repels, captivates and creates a scorn and rejection. There are various levels, including seduction and illicit love, passionately embraced or dejectedly spurned. It is possible to see affairs and adventures, with due affirmation of the interconnection of soul and body. It is also possible to see a purer and more simply passionate love, possibly related to his courtship and marriage.

Regardless of the biographical nature of the poetry in describing actual circumstances, there must be seen in Donne's writing a kind of interior history. At first there is great conflict, the war of sense and spirit, the resented antagonism of body and soul. This has to say something of Donne's own revolt of spirit, his bursting into life and experience, travel, the court, women. Then there comes the reassertion of the ascetic and spiritual after the

---

<sup>42</sup>Theodore Gill, The Sermons of John Donne (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), pp. 32-33.

emancipated passions have somewhat spent themselves. There is a sense in which this motion was something that never becomes settled in Donne, nor is it the simple swinging of a pendulum from strictness to debauchery back to repentance. He refused to accept the dualism of body and soul that so dominated medieval thought, influenced as it was by Neo-Platonism. To separate body and soul was heresy both in love and religion for Donne. At this point the problems of love were more vital, though not to the total exclusion of religion. Yet the whole motion of the Renaissance was in him, including the new philosophy of Bacon and the influence of men like Erasmus, Rabelais and Montaigne.

We have not to this point touched on the religious poetry of Donne. We will not now consider the poems he wrote as an Anglican priest. His serious religious work before his ordination begins sometime before 1610, probably during his stay at Mitcham. The first of these is La Corona, a ring of seven sonnets sent to Mrs. Herbert and to Richard Sackville, the third Earl of Dorset, in 1608 or 1609. The Litanie is also from this period, and is a poem of serious meditation, though still of a certain restraint and formalism. Donne is not at peace, though it may be observed that he never allowed himself to forget his inner identity as a penitent alien. This despair is even more evident in the Holy Sonnets, the majority of which were written during the stay at Mitcham. Donne broods on

death, recounts his sins, begs for a deeper penitence, wonders at his own perfidy, implores the Deity for a cleansing of his soul, but despairs that it will ever come.

A very significant turn in Donne's life came in 1611, the year of the death of Elizabeth Drury, fifteen-year-old daughter of Sir Robert Drury. Donne had never seen the girl and may have had what could only be a passing acquaintance with the parents. It is possible that he was interested in the situation by his sister, who, with her now deceased husband, William Lyly, had been intimately associated with the Drury family. At any rate, Donne was moved to write an elegy to present to the grieving parents on their daughter's death. This was published in 1611 along with another work, An Anatomie of the World. It was the custom of the time for poets to write such works, and Donne was casting about constantly for sources of patronage.

Donne's poem made a deep impression on the bereaved parents, and in the summer of 1611 Donne went with the Drurys on an extended trip to the continent. Donne completed the writing of the second of his "Anniversaries," Of the Progresse of the Soule. These are enigmatic poems. It is a work regarded by Richard Hughes as of great significance in Donne's spiritual and philosophical development:

Donne's vigil ends with the Anniversary poems. An Anatomy of the World and Of the Progresse of the Soule constitute the

apogee of his interior life, the irreversible moment toward which everything before moves and from which everything after flows. . . . But all the critical stages of his own progress, the nuclei of perceptions and insights, came to fruition in the Anniversaries. The quest ordained in the third satire is completed in these poems: the soul's rest and the mind's endeavor are finally realized.<sup>43</sup>

In this analysis Hughes is building on the work of Louis Martz, for until his writing there were few who took these works very seriously.<sup>44</sup> Martz suggests that these poems are in reality a personal inventory, much on the order of Milton in Lycidas. It is true that Donne remarked to Jonson that Elizabeth Drury is symbolic of the "Idea of Woman." Hughes launches on an elaborate course of hidden symbolic interpretation, including the writing on December 13, which is St. Lucie's Day. He brings out the entire history of the saint and her martyrdom, links this with Lucy, Countess of Bedford, and the winter solstice and the Gospel of John.

The work was not well received in Donne's time, and he vigorously answered the criticisms. It represents the confused state of mind and the increasing tension that dogged Donne as he moved toward his ultimate role as a priest in the Church of England.

---

<sup>43</sup>Hughes, p. 196.

<sup>44</sup>Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), and "John Donne in Meditation: 'The Anniversaries,'" A Journal of English Literary History, XIV (December, 1947), 247-273.

## Donne's Conversion

It is difficult to discuss the conversion of John Donne. One complication is the confusion involved in the use of the term. Conversion can apply to a change of religion or a change of sectarian loyalty within a religion, as in the move from Catholicism to Protestantism. It can also apply to the process or crisis through which one passes to a commitment of faith. We must look at both of these as they apply to Donne, and they are both difficult to trace.

### Donne's Conversion from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism

There can be no question of the strong Roman Catholic influence on Donne's youth through his family. We must remember how very strong an influence ecclesiastical considerations exerted on all of English life. This was an exceedingly religious era. Pius V excommunicated Queen Elizabeth in 1570 and the Thirty-nine Articles were completed in 1571. This was also the year of the first great protest of Puritanism, An Admonition to the Parliament. Persecution of Romanists under Elizabeth I and Edward VI had forced nearly all of Donne's prominent forbears to flee the country for some period of time. Donne wrote in his introduction to Pseudo-Martyr in 1610, "no family which is not of far larger extent and greater branches, hath

endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes for obeying the teachings of Roman doctrine than it hath done."<sup>45</sup>

Walton attempts to find in the period of Donne's late teens (1588-1591) the beginning of serious exploration of the issues of religion. Walton's dating of these events has often been criticized, and the problems are obvious. After beginning study at Lincoln's Inn at seventeen, Donne, according to Walton, is religiously neutral a year later:

. . . at that time he had betrothed himself to no Religion that might give him any other denomination than a Christian. And Reason, and Piety had both persuaded him that there could be no such sin as Schism, if an adherence to some visible Church were not necessary.<sup>46</sup>

Walton continues his rather prejudiced account of the youthful Donne by concluding that his nineteenth year marked the beginning of earnest study of the body of Divinity as controverted between the Reformed and Roman churches. For this purpose, the nineteen-year-old Donne is supposed to have read Cardinal Bellarmine as the most capable representative of Romanism. Dr. Augustus Jessopp has ingeniously shown that this could hardly be, since Bellarmine's work was not available until 1593, and Walton mistakenly observes that Donne showed the well-marked works of the cardinal to

---

<sup>45</sup>Mueller, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup>Walton, p. 25.

the Dean of Gloucester in Donne's twentieth year.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, the whole matter of Donne's religious convictions will have to be viewed with some reserve for this particular period in his life. The young Donne was more probably throwing off than taking on religion at this juncture. He comments on this sense of oppression: "I had my first breeding and conversation with men of suppressed and afflicted religion, accustomed to the despite of death and hungry of an imagined martyrdom."<sup>48</sup> This does not seem the forte of the young Donne, painted as a soldier at twenty-one, of whom Sir Richard Baker wrote, "Mr. John Donne . . . lived at the Innes of Court, not dissolute, but very neat, a great Visitor of Ladies, a great frequenter of Playes, a great writer of conceited verses."<sup>49</sup> Such a character, especially with the ambition and passion that Donne finally displays, is hardly one to make the goal of his life the resolution of the Anglican-Roman debate. This is not to deny that this eventually became a matter of utmost significance to Donne. One has to take seriously the statements of his preface to Pseudo-Martyr of 1610.

---

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 26. Walton cannot remember the name of the Dean of Gloucester. It was probably Thomas Morton.

<sup>48</sup>Donne, The Poems, p. xiv.

<sup>49</sup>Richard Baker, A Chronicle of the Kings of England (London: E. Cotes, 1665), p. 450. Quoted by many authors.

They who have descended so low as to take knowledge of me, and to admit me into their consideration, know well that I used no inordinate haste nor precipitation in binding my conscience to any local religion. I had a longer work to do than many other men; for I was first to blot out certain impressions of the Roman religion, and to wrestle both against the examples and against the reasons by which some hold was taken and some anticipations early laid upon my conscience, both by persons who by nature had a power and superiority over my will, and others who by their learning and good life seemed to me justly to claim an interest for the guiding and rectifying of mine understanding in these matters. And although I apprehended well enough that this irresolution not only retarded my fortune, but also bred some scandal and endangered my spiritual reputation by laying me open to many misinterpretations . . . and indifferent affections.

This is not the "moderate haste" in the nineteenth year that Walton would like to find.

Yet it is also right to say that love and poetry were quite certainly not the entire concern of Donne in his years at Lincoln's Inn. Walton observes that even in the most unsettled days of his youth, Donne rose at four and was in his study till ten. The material of the Satires is especially indicative of earnest religious, or at least, ecclesiastical thought. His love for study is exuberantly reflected in the first Satire:

Leave me, and in this standing wooden chest  
 Consorted with these few books let me lie.  
 In Prison and here be coffin'd when I die!  
 Here are God's conduits, grave Divines; and here  
 Nature's Secretary, the Philosopher;  
 And jolly Statesmen, which teach how to tie  
 The sinews of a city's mystic body;  
 Here gathering Chroniclers, and by them stand  
 Giddy fantastic Poets of each land.



Shall I leave all this constant company,  
And follow headlong, wild uncertain thee?

Nature's Secretary was Aristotle, and Donne's collection of Spanish, French, Italian and German theologians, poets, and controversialists was extensive. It has already been noted that he had begun a study of Bellarmine.

Perhaps the third Satire is something of a guide in the process of Donne's thinking at this time. He was probably sowing some wild oats, even though, according to Eliot, it was a small handful. He was also ambitious, certainly in equality with his friends --Henry Wotton, John Davies, John Hoskins. But in his way was a stumblingblock which his associates did not share. He was a Catholic, and there were only two roads open, --to go abroad and seek preferment under a Catholic ruler, or to remain in England a recusant, and be shut off from all preferment and advance. In such a bind, and keenly aware of the various conditions that bring about religious postures, Donne can be understood when he contemplates openness to a change in his heritage.

This is not to question Donne's sincerity, though certainly some do.<sup>50</sup> Yet Donne's eventual career makes one feel that his

---

<sup>50</sup>Sydney Dark, Five Deans (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928), pp. 57ff. "It is always hard to believe in the genuineness of a change of religion that is quite certain to pay, and there is something not a little contemptible in the haste with which John Donne, the descendant of generations of martyrs, joined the dominant Church."

choice in religion was after careful consideration affected both by reason and tradition. It must be remembered that this point does not mark a radical commitment to Anglicanism so much as a nominal disavowal of Catholic loyalty. Donne wrote in the third Satire:

. . . believe me this  
 He's not of none nor worst, that seeks the best.  
 To adore or scorn an image, or protest  
 May all be bad; doubt wisely; in strange way  
 To stand inquiring right is not to stray;  
 To sleep or run wrong is. On a huge hill  
 Cragged and steep truth stands, and he that will  
 Reach her about must and about must go  
 And what the hill's suddenness resists win so.

There is some ambiguity here, but Donne has at least decided that it is right to conform to the religion of one's sovereign and country.

Grierson assumes that Donne is the kind of person that would eventually adopt the religion of his country, whatever that might be.<sup>51</sup> This is a subjective judgment, and with a degree of correctness might be said about virtually anyone. Donne does make one nervous in his constant clamoring for position and his ready truckling to anyone for patronage.

I think there is one factor that has been overlooked in evaluating Donne's depth of motivation in his adoption of Anglicanism. If we are assuming that Donne is a man moved by expediency, and since the change of religion was advantageous for him, then it

---

<sup>51</sup>Donne, The Poems, p. xxviii.

follows that this was his true reason for change. However, the marriage of Donne permanently gives the lie to any affirmation that Donne was an inveterate opportunist. It is true that romance and passion can make what Donne calls "the triple fool," yet the point remains that Donne was ready to follow his heart, even at great personal sacrifice. It is impossible to know just how well Donne comprehended the extent of that sacrifice when he married Anne, but he certainly knew it would be no easy road, and this proved sadly correct.

What does this say about Donne's conversion from Roman Catholicism? It seems to allow the assumption that Donne was just as significantly moved by deep feelings of religious conviction, just as much moved by strong and noble passion for religious integrity when he renounced Popery, as he was attracted by preferment. When we add the force of reason and historical argument, in which Donne was expert, the conversion takes on greater possibilities of integrity.

All of this is difficult to trace. When Donne abandoned his family tradition he did not leave any explicit account of his action. For a long time he was out of one faith but not possessed of another. Gosse finds this evident in commenting on The Progress of the Soul:

No one can read this poem of August, 1601 and believe that Donne's memory was not, in later years, amiably deceived when he told Izaak Walton that he continued through these years to "proceed with humility and diffidence in disquisition and search" after religious truth. It is quite certain from all the

evidence we possess--if we regard it honestly--that Donne's conscience was not yet touched. He had lost his traditional faith as a Catholic, and no light had come to him at present from the other Church.<sup>52</sup>

However, the ambivalence of such a statement should cast some doubt on the following judgment:

The fact, however, remains that his conversion was entirely in accord with self-interest, while the retention of his father's faith entailed considerable danger and made exile a practical certainty. It is always hard to believe in the genuineness of a change of religion that is quite certain to pay, and there is something not a little contemptible in the haste with which John Donne, the descendant of generations of martyrs, joined the dominant Church. The meanness is not made any the less by the grandiloquence of his Pseudo-Martyr, written in 1610, in which he explains that conviction only came to him after much reading and prayer.<sup>53</sup>

All this is not to say that the obscurity of his conversion from Romanism meant that this step in his religious life was unimportant. It was in some ways the most important single event in his life. His youthful sympathies had to be with the persecuted Romanists. Yet he was familiar with the fanaticism of the Jesuits, which he found most odious. He finally came to believe that the true Catholicism was Anglican, not Roman. The extremes of Protestantism, especially Calvinism, do not seem to have been the issue for him, and he rejected them. He called the Roman and Anglican

---

<sup>52</sup>Gosse, I, 140.

<sup>53</sup>Dark, pp. 58-59.

traditions "sister teats of his graces," yet found them "both diseased and infected, but not both alike." He felt the Anglican communion to be episcopal and sacramental, but without the accretions of Rome.

One result of his deliberation was moderation in his references to Rome, though they may sound caustic to modern ears. His animus is largely vented against the Jesuits for their divisiveness and intransigency. For others Donne is charitable if they profess the Christian religion and do not seek to shake the foundations of the Church.

The problem in all of this arises from later statements from Donne. Consider this, written in a letter to Sir Robert Ker in April, 1627: "My tenents are always for the preservation of the religion I was born in, and the peace of the state, and the rectifying of the conscience." Gosse notes the seeming inconsistency and comments:

The words here, "the religion I was born in," are very startling, and at first sight incomprehensible. Everybody knew that Donne had been born and bred a Romanist, and his family were stringent recusants. . . . But I think that Donne, as a staunch High Churchman, would not admit any essential difference between the Catholic religion, in which he was born, and that which he now professed. . . . If, as Dr. James Gairdner has said, "Rome was no longer competent to be guardian either of faith or morals," the Catholic religion in England, as in Italy, was none the less one and indivisible.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup>Gosse, II, 247.

This entire discussion makes the following quotation from Donne extremely interesting:

Truly I have been sorry to see some person converted from the Roman Church to ours; because I have known, that onely temporall respects have moved them, and they have lived after rather in nullity or indifference to either religion, than in a true and established zeale. Of which kinde, I cannot forbear to report to you so much of the story of a French gentleman. . . . This man, who was turned from the Reformed to the Roman religion, being asked, halfe in jest; Sir, which is the best religion, you must needs know, that have been of both? answered, Certainly, the religion I left, the reformed religion, must needs be the best religion, for when I changed, I had this religion, the Roman religion, for it, and three hundred Crowns a year to boot; which was the pension given to him upon his conversion. (X, 161)

It is true that here Donne laments what must be termed an insincere conversion. Yet he sees problems in any conversion at all, especially if this is a removal from one segment of the Christian faith to another: "You shall seldom see a coin, upon which the stamp were removed, though to imprint it better, but it looks awry and squint. And so for the most part, do minds which have received divers impressions."<sup>55</sup> Donne came to believe that defection is only valid when fundamental error is present:

Let none divorce himself from that religion, and that worship of God, which God put into his armes, and which he embraced in his Baptism. Except there be errour in fundamental points, such as make that Church no Church, let no man depart from that Church and that religion in which he delivered himself to the service of God at first.

---

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., II, 78.

What do such statements mean in the light of Donne's own experience? There are several directions for explanation. When Donne speaks as a seasoned minister of the Anglican Church it can hardly be a surprise that he considers his entire life to have been spent in loyalty to that body. A close survey of his career reveals many hours of study and writing in defense of Anglicanism. We may put over against this the lack of any serious commitment to the Roman Church during his childhood and youth. When these are considered together Donne's eventual statements about his loyalty become more understandable.

We may also consider Donne's deep conviction that the Anglican Church is truly Catholic. This is so true for Donne that his move from Roman heritage to Anglican loyalty could have been viewed as no real "conversion." No rebaptism was required, and evidently no great change in life-style took place.

#### Donne's Conversion from doubt to faith

The process through which Donne came to a meaningful commitment of faith constitutes more of a theological problem, and this need for clarity seems to escape some. Gosse, however, is quite explicit:

Those who are in the habit of observing the religious life of others with attention are familiar, in whatever temper they may regard it, with the spiritual phenomenon which is known as "conversion." It is not a matter of conviction or works, though the first may produce and the second result from it; nor is it in any degree universal among those who are eminent for piety and unction. It may come to the most and to the least instructed; it is a state of soul, a psychological condition abruptly reached by some, and not reached at all by many. Some pass into it who afterwards pass out again into indifferentism; some never experience the sudden advent of it, although their fidelity to the faith persists unshaken.<sup>56</sup>

Gosse feels that this kind of experience was Donne's at the death of his wife.

There are certain psychological and theological principles that may be overlooked in the analyzing of Donne's conversion. First, there is the evidence from the statements of Donne himself, including the theological and philosophical framework within which Donne would explicate his religious experience. Second, there is the confusion present when too much is asked from the experience of religious conversion, especially when the problem is compounded by looking at the experience on empirical grounds. Conversion is not calling to the ministry, nor is it sanctification.

What do we find when we examine Donne's writings for information about his conversion? Virtually nothing. One hopes to find something as focal and dramatic as Luther in the thunderstorm,

---

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., II, 99.



or Wesley at Aldersgate, but there is no real spiritual watershed to help to a before and after. There are spiritual landmarks in Donne's experience, but the problem is to identify them from Donne's own statements, and this is difficult.

Donne was a member of the seventeenth century Anglican Church, which emphasized liturgy, sacerdotalism and sacraments. Its sacramental theology, informed by the Reformation principle of justification by faith, muted the more radical elements of pietism that characterized the Anabaptists and the other new sects of Protestantism. Donne understood his position in this matter quite clearly. The following is from a Whitsunday sermon, probably of 1626:

The holy Ghost reproves thee, convinces thee, of judgment, that is, offers thee the knowledge that such a Church there is; a Jordan to wash thine originall leprosie in Baptisme; a City upon a mountaine, to enlighten thee in the works of darknesse; a continuall application of all that Christ Jesus said, and did, and suffered, to thee. Let no soule say, she can have all this at Gods hands immediately, and never trouble the Church; That she can passe her pardon between God and her, without all these formalities, by a secret repentance. It is true, beloved, a true repentance is never frustrate; But yet, if thou wilt think thy selfe a little Church, a Church to thy selfe, because thou hast heard it said, That thou art a little world, a world in thy selfe, that figurative, that metaphoricall representation shall not save thee. Though thou beest a world to thy self, yet if thou have no more corn, nor oyle, nor milk, then growes in thy self, or flowes from thy self, thou wilt starve; Though thou be a Church in thy fancy, if thou have nor more seales of grace, no more absolution of sin, then thou canst give thy self, thou wilt perish. (VII, 232-33)

This kind of statement can be discovered constantly in Donne's sermons. One more may suffice:

Therefore we have a clearer, that is, a nearer light then the written Gospell, that is, the Church. For the principall intention in Christs miracles, even in the purpose of God, was but thereby to create and constitute, and establish an assurance, that He that did those Miracles, was the right man, the true Messias, that Son of God, who was made man for the redemption and ransome of the whole world. But then, that which was to give them their best assistance, that was to supply all, by that way, to apply this generall redemption to every particular soule, that was the establishing of a Church, of a visible and constant, and permanent meanes of salvation, by his Ordinances there, usque ad consummationem, till the end of the world. (VIII, 307)

This awareness of the Church as the "Cradle of Christ," the bearer of salvation and the minister of his graces, is nonetheless tempered by a Reformation awareness of the need of a vital faith. Donne was wary of Calvin and deplored the discussions of predestination, election and reprobation spawned by Geneva. But he was not wary of the Reformed emphasis on the direct action of God on the soul in salvation, which could not be brought about by any amount of ecclesiastical manipulation:

. . . that you may be troubled in your hearts, and not cry Peace, Peace, where there is no peace, and flatter yourselves because you are in a true Religion and in the right way; for a Child may drowne in a Font, and a Man may be poysoned in the Sacrament, much more perish, though in a true Church. (VI, 61)

This, however, does not circumvent the sacramental theology that informed Donne, bred as he was in Catholicism and nurtured in medieval commentators. Donne had confidence in the

Church. Through its sacraments and its ministry of the Word, all that was needed for life and godliness was available. Yet there was a period of doubt and confusion for Donne, marked by moral perfidy and repentance.

The theological context for Donne would not demand or even condone a "conversion" for a man who never felt that the Church which suckled him had anything but too much doctrine, or that the Church which finally nurtured and welcomed him was anything but apostolic and truly Catholic. It should be noted that he found the theology of the Anglican Church so amenable that he never tried to alter or question it in any way.

There never was a time when Donne would have considered himself an "unbeliever," even though he was to feel a deep need of penitence. The problem for Donne was his inability or unwillingness to forge his ideas into a unified system, which was the great task of the scholastics. There is nothing encyclopedic about Donne, and none of his works attempt a Summa. In fact, one can see in Donne a pleasant kind of disorganization, especially in his poetry, that suffuses his information with emotion and disregards the goal of logic or system. It was the possession of such a system that characterized the pious mind of the scholastic. In spite of his lack of system, Donne was a believer, and, in his own way, consistently devout. A noted Donne scholar, John Sparrow, comments: "We need

only look at one of his earliest poems to see that even his most dissolute days religion was to Donne something more than a merely intellectual interest."<sup>57</sup> On this kind of assumption, it is foolish to look for a radical conversion. It is not the simple prerogative of the analyst to depict on the one hand, Jack Donne, the rake, the wandering wastrel, caught up in the dissolute life, and on the other, John Donne the priest, settled, confident and intensely pious. It is one and the same man both in early and later life, at least according to T. S. Eliot.<sup>58</sup> It is precisely because he was simul iustus et peccator that his preaching eventually becomes so vibrant, and it may be that this is what commends his work to us today.<sup>59</sup>

It is a dubious effort to give Donne a conversion by secondary evidences. This is the attempt of William Mueller. He rejects the descriptions of Walton and Gosse:

Though both Walton and Gosse make too much, I think, of the conversion experience in Donne's life, of the black and white distinction between Donne's wild youth and his saintly manhood, it is nevertheless true that Donne's intensive concern with and analysis of sin, so markedly evident in his early preaching years, would seem to argue a fairly sudden and penetrating awareness of personal sin . . . his preoccupation with sin is

---

<sup>57</sup> John Sparrow, Theology, XXII (March, 1931), 144-154.

<sup>58</sup> Eliot, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Theodore Gill thinks so. Cf. Gill, pp. 8-12.

indeed the mark of a converted man. Only a man who feels an intensely personal conviction of sin has the power to anatomize it with the consuming perception which Donne exhibits.<sup>60</sup>

This is a confusion of conversion and faith. No one could question that Donne was, as a minister and even before this, a person of broad theological awareness. It does not, however, necessarily follow that a preacher capable of describing sin well has been suddenly delivered from it. The evidence of Donne's life seems to indicate his sanctification to be a rather lengthy process. Janel M. Mueller comments:

Unlike Saul of Tarsus who in a blinding flash from heaven was called to become St. Paul, the rake Jack became the exemplary Doctor Donne through a long, agonizing, and equivocal process. There was never a more equivocal moment than just before Donne's taking of holy orders when he announced his intention of printing his poems and made a last desperate attempt to secure civil employment by importuning the Earl of Somerset.<sup>61</sup>

Most observers will see, therefore, a whole series of conversions for Donne, none in any sense final, but all part of the structure of Donne's rich, spiritual pilgrimage.

Within this perspective, it is proper to view at least two events in Donne's life as extremely critical, from which he emerges with a further altered direction and increased depth. One is his

---

<sup>60</sup>Mueller, p. 168.

<sup>61</sup>Janel M. Mueller, Donne's Prebend Sermons (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 1.

entrance into orders. The survey of his life already given serves to grant this occasion a primary place. This had to be a public commitment. It made Donne accept the full implications of Christian vocation. It is not difficult to see his inner feelings reflected in the poem he later wrote, "To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders." Donne's quiet realism, his tempered awareness of his continued search and need is beautifully disclosed:

Dost thou finde  
New thoughts and stirrings in thee? and as Steele  
Toucht with a Loadstone, dost new motions feelee?  
. . .  
Thou art the same materials, as before,  
Onely the stampe is changed, but no more.

Donne had a high concept of ministry, and his ordination marked an end to the whole long sequence of frustrated ambition and self-seeking. There is nothing inappropriate in the theory that Donne finally took to himself enough of a sense of forgiveness and acceptance with God to allow him this step which previously he neither wished, nor felt he merited.

The other converting event that seems to be critical in Donne's odyssey was the death of his wife. R. C. Bald finds great depth in this experience:

The death of his wife marked a turning point in Donne's life; it deepened his sense of religious vocation, and produced something much closer to a conversion than the feelings which had prompted him to enter the Church. Until her death all Donne's deepest emotional experiences seem to have been

associated with her; after her loss, his emotions concentrated themselves on the divine image and the activities connected with his sacred calling.<sup>62</sup>

Awareness of this change in Donne is shared by virtually all who study him. There is a profound increase in intensity of religious feelings, and there can be no question of his dedication to God from this point on.

Donne lacked at first a full conviction of the positive elements in Christianity, though he was keenly alive to the negative ones, the dangers of sin, the need for divine grace to conquer sin, and so on. Then, as he continued to preach, and as his personal experience impinged on his mind, he came to feel certain things more deeply than he had before accepted intellectually. He became more perceptive of the nature of man's love for God and the glory of God's love to man. He awakened to an emotional as well as an intellectual conviction that Christ had redeemed mankind. Both of these developments appear first in sermons preached shortly after the death of his wife, Ann, in 1617.<sup>63</sup>

Of almost equal importance in Donne's spiritual pilgrimage is the renewal experienced from recovery from the illness of 1623. The Devotions upon Emergent occasions becomes a pledge of renewal and a kind of confirmation of his calling, rather than a spiritual testament as it had originally been planned. Both Donne and his physicians did not anticipate his recovery from the relapsing fever, and when he did survive he could only view it as a kind of

---

<sup>62</sup>Bald, p. 328.

<sup>63</sup>G. R. Potter, "John Donne, Poet to Priest," in Five Gayley Lectures, 1947-54 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955).

resurrection. His sermons following the illness carry out this theme. Donne had been granted a kind of personal Easter, and he now viewed all of his previous "deaths and resurrections" as his deliverances from sin and suffering. Above all, he was spared in order to preach, and this zest and commitment were to continue till his death. There are frequent comparisons of Donne to Augustine, dating from Walton, but it may not be inappropriate to compare the Devotions, along with the Holy Sonnets and hymns, as the closest to the Confessions in style and significance.<sup>64</sup>

So it may be concluded that "Donne's several conversions never come like thunderclap on the road to Damascus . . . but like scouting parties in advance of battalions."<sup>65</sup> The problem of this approach, however, is to extend rather broadly the term "conversion." Donne makes great spiritual progress, but he himself does not mark for us a point from which these changes may be dated or measured. A summary from Gosse is appropriate:

With Donne, an intellectual curiosity as to theological questions long preceded any subjection of his brain or heart to that conduct of life logically involved by them. With no suspicion of insincerity, he was a practised theologian before he could make any pretence to being a Christian man. But, as time went by and the turmoil of his instincts was quieted, crisis after

---

<sup>64</sup>J. Mueller, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup>Hughes, p. 48.



crisis brought Donne nearer and nearer to the religious life. His marriage, and the shock to his fortunes produced by it; his secretarial work for Morton; each of his serious attacks of illness; each proof he had of declining physical vivacity; brought him nearer and nearer to the state of grace, lowering the material and heightening the spiritual part of him.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup>Gosse, II, 100-101.

## CHAPTER II

### THE HOMILETICS OF JOHN DONNE

#### Donne's Preaching Career

When Donne returned to Anne and their seven children in 1612, it was agreed that he could occupy a house belonging to Sir Robert Drury in Drury Lane in London. Gosse comments that he was now at the age of forty, perhaps the most brilliantly equipped mind in the kingdom, and yet comparatively a nobody.<sup>1</sup> This was a continued bad time. In 1613 Donne was seriously ill. His troubles were both gastric and rheumatic, and for a while he seemed threatened with blindness. He began entertaining some ideas of divinity, a course which had been prescribed by Morton and the King on previous occasions. In order to gain preferment he approached Rochester, then Earl of Somerset, who was in favor with the king. He did this through the good offices of Lord Hay. This first clear indication of a willingness by Donne to become a preacher deserves notation:

---

<sup>1</sup>Edmund Gosse, The Life and Letters of John Donne (London: Heinemann, 1899), II, 3.

My Lord, I may justly fear that your Lordship hath never heard of the name which lies at the bottom of this letter; nor could I come to the boldness of presenting it now, without another boldness, of putting his Lordship, who now delivers it, to that office. Yet I have (or flatter myself to have) just excuses of this, and just ground of that ambition. For, having obeyed at last, after much debatement within me, the inspirations (as I hope) of the Spirit of God, and resolved to make my profession Divinity; I make account, that I do but tell your Lordship, what God hath told me, which is, that it is in this course, if in any, that my service may be of use to this Church and State. Since then your Lordship's virtues have made you so near the head in the one, and so religious a member of the other, I come to this courage, of thrusting myself thus into your Lordship's presence, both in respect that I was an independent, and disobliged man, towards any other person in this State; and delivered over now (in my resolution) to be a household servant of God. I humbly beseech your Lordship, that since these my purposes are likely to meet quickly a false and unprofitable dignity, which is the envy of others, you will vouchsafe to undertake, or prevent, or disable that, by affording them the true dignity of your just interpretations, and favorable assistance. And to receive into your knowledge so much of the history, and into your protection so much of the endeavors, of your Lordship's most humble and devoted servant.<sup>2</sup>

Yet oddly enough, Rochester took no interest in making Donne into a cleric, but evidently saw in him an able source of legal and effective help to bring about a marriage. Rochester sought the wife of the Earl of Essex, Frances Howard. The extent of Donne's help is not clear, but he did write an Epithalamion for the wedding and included a vigorous defense of the divorce. This is hardly one of Donne's finer moments. There were, it is true, others in high places who

---

<sup>2</sup>Tobie Mathews Collection, A Collection of Letters, Made by Sr Tobie Mathews Kt. (1660), pp. 319-320.

condoned this whole rather sticky business, but the commendation, even though a poetic formality, was not mandatory.

Donne now wrote Rochester requesting a recommendation to the ambassadorship to Venice. This got nowhere. There were constant illnesses in his family. His daughter Mary died in May, 1614, and his son, Francis, in November. His wife had a miscarriage in early 1614, and for a time both he and his wife were ill. Nor did his household expenses abate, and the complaints of financial stringency in his letters are frequent.

Now came the supreme and final effort for employment.

Walton gives the account:

. . . many persons of worth mediated with his Majesty for some secular employment for him (to which his Education had apted him) and particularly the Earl of Somerset, when in his greatest height of favour; who being then at Theobalds with the King, where one of the Clerks of the Council died that night, the Earl posted a messenger for Mr. Donne to come to him immediately, and at Mr. Donne's coming, said, Mr. Donne, To testifie the reality of my Affection, and my purpose to prefer you. Stay in this Garden till I go up to the King, and bring you word that you are clerk of the Council: doubt not my doing this, for I know the King loves you, and know the King will not deny me. But the King gave me a positive denial to all requests, and having a discerning spirit, replied, I know Mr. Donne is a learned man, has the abilities of a learned Divine; and will prove a powerful Preacher, and my desire is to prefer him that way, and in that way, I will deny you nothing for him.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Izaak Walton, Lives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), pp. 45-46.

There are some problems with Walton's story, but the outline is clear and correct. Donne was certainly seeking employment. He wrote Sir Robert More, "No man attends court fortunes with more impatience than I do."<sup>4</sup> And Donne later refers to the urgings of the King for him to enter the ministry. This was really the end of the road for Donne as far as seeking secular position was concerned. He had earlier indicated to Somerset his interest in a church profession, and now, with the clear statement of the king, he set about to end his old life and take up the cloth. This was in November, 1614.

There is little to reveal Donne's inner life during this period in Drury Lane. It is probable that at this time he wrote Essays in Divinity, although there can be argument that it was an earlier work.<sup>5</sup> John Donne, Jr., speaks very positively about the occasion for writing this work in the preface to the printed edition of 1651. He notes that they were "writ when the author was obliged in Civill business and has no ingagement in that of the Church," and

---

<sup>4</sup>Gosse, II, 46.

<sup>5</sup>Richard E. Hughes, The Progress of the Soul (New York: Morrow, 1968), pp. 130-138 considers the Essays a paradigm of Donne's thought from 1607-1610. However, his whole thesis of the Anniversaries as the zenith of mental and spiritual development produces some bias in the treatment of the Essays.

"they were the voluntary sacrifices of several hours when he had many debates betwixt God and himself, whether he were worthy, and competently learned to enter in Holy Orders."<sup>6</sup>

Donne, Jr., seems quite assured of the setting for writing, but the content of the work does not materially assist in understanding Donne at this point in his pilgrimage. The essays, which are in sermon form, are highly technical and learned discussions of the opening verses of Genesis and Exodus. The most striking part of the work is the prayers, which bear the personal stamp of the longings of the author, rather than the pastoral concerns of a worshipping congregation:

Thou has set up many candlesticks, and kindled many lamps in mee; but I have either blown them out, or carried them to guide me in by and forbidden ways. Thou has given mee a desire of knowledge, and some means to it, and some possession of it; and I have arm'd myself with thy weapons against thee. Yet, O God, have mercy upon me, for thine own sake have mercy upon me. Let me not sin and me be able to exceed thee, nor to defraud thee, nor to frustrate thy purposes: But let me, in despite of Me, be of so much use to thy glory, that by thy mercy to my sin, other sinners may see how much sin thou canst pardon. Thus show mercy to many in one.<sup>7</sup>

So Donne finally stands on the threshold of ministerial vocation. The decision lacks the lustre of high dedication, tarnished

---

<sup>6</sup>John Donne, Essays in Divinity (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

as it is by the assiduous search for other employment. Bald  
comments:

Yet when the best has been said that can be said, it must be confessed that Donne's life during his last eighteen months as a layman does not present a particularly edifying spectacle. . . . In spite of his disclaimers he appears as one who has mastered at last the arts of the courtier, and it is clear, even when he finally turned to the Church, that he did not intend to abandon those arts, but to rise by them. At no period in his life does he appear less unselfish, more self-seeking.<sup>8</sup>

On January 25, 1615, Donne was ordained deacon, then priest by the Bishop of London, Dr. John King. Not much is known of Donne immediately following this event. He notified his friends and especially built good relations with George Abbott, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had been in tension with Somerset. He preached his first sermon as a priest in a small church in Paddington. He was soon invited to preach for the King at Whitehall and was appointed a Royal Chaplain. There were many of these chaplains but the responsibility did keep his contact with the court and also allowed him multiple benefices. Also, by the King's mandate, he received the Doctor of Divinity degree from Cambridge.

Preaching did not necessarily come easily for Donne. His learning would in many instances make communication more difficult, and there is nothing to indicate that he had any significant practice in

---

<sup>8</sup>R. C. Bald, John Donne (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 299-300.

public speaking. He had to work hard for the accomplished style of delivery and easy influence which finally brought him such fame as a pulpiteer.

Donne was still involved in financial difficulty and continued his attempts for patronage, both from Lucy, Countess of Bedford, and from the Countess of Huntingdon. However, in January, 1616, he received his first benefice, the rectory of Keystone in Huntingdon, bestowed by the King. His second came a few months later from his old master, then Sir Thomas Egerton, now Lord Ellsmere. This was Sevenoaks in Kent, a sinecure which Donne held until his death. Donne never resided in either place, but the income was good, and from this point on Donne was never again to be in lack of money to meet his obligations.

In October, 1616, Donne received his first significant ministerial appointment. He was made a Reader at Lincoln's Inn. He followed a Dr. Thomas Holloway, and was required to preach twice each Sunday during the term and once on the Sunday before and after the term. Donne received room and board for himself, and a servant, and sixty pounds a year. This must have been a delightful assignment for Donne. He was within walking distance of Drury Lane. He had a congregation, spoken of as an "auditory," of well-educated persons, delighted to welcome one of their own society. His duties were not heavy, and he had a chaplain as assistant. So he



set about building his sermons, and along with it, building his reputation as a preacher.

This brought him the invitation to speak at the outdoor pulpit at St. Paul's Cathedral, known as Paul's Cross, on March 24, 1617. Donne did very well, and the day was auspicious, being the anniversary of the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of James.

The year 1617 marked one of the great crises in Donne's life. On August 10 his wife gave birth to a still-born child. The ordeal left her exhausted and she died on August 15, worn out by child-bearing at the age of thirty-three. She had twelve children; two were still-born and three had already died. Her oldest at this time was Constance, about fourteen, and the youngest, a year old, was Elizabeth.

The personality of Ann Donne is almost impossible to determine, though not her influence on her husband. There can be no doubt of her perception, intelligence and stability in the face of the mercurial changes of John. Her love endured a great deal, but was responded to by Donne in kind. Walton recounts that Donne solemnly promised his children that he would never remarry and subject them to a stepmother.<sup>9</sup> The fact that he made and kept such a promise

---

<sup>9</sup>Walton, p. 31.

tells a great deal about the character of this woman. There would certainly be every reason for Donne to remarry, both for the benefit of his seven children and for the personal, social, and perhaps economic benefit to himself. In the epitaph for her that Donne wrote he called her "a most excellent and beloved woman, a most loving and chaste wife, a most dutiful and forbearing mother."

Gosse places the writing of La Corona in 1617, from internal evidence of stanza XVII, which begins, "Since she whom I lov'd hath pay'd her last debt."<sup>10</sup> Bald puts La Corona along with A Litanie and many of the Holy Sonnets back in the period at Mitcham.<sup>11</sup> But whatever the literary tribute, her death was of great sobering and deepening effect on Donne and his ministry, and sent him back to his preaching with a warmth and compassion which he did not previously have.

The following year is reasonably ordinary for Donne. His children were being cared for, probably largely by servants. He was preaching regularly at Lincoln's Inn, which was busy preparing for the construction of a chapel. He preached on stated occasions, first Friday in Lent, and in April, for the King.

---

<sup>10</sup>Gosse, II, 105.

<sup>11</sup>Bald, p. 233. In fn. 2 Bald quotes D. Novarr as placing La Corona in 1608 or 1609 and cites Gardner as evidence for the Mitcham date.

In 1619 Donne was appointed by the King as chaplain to attend Lord Doncaster on a state visit to the princes of Germany and to Bohemia. It was not a visit that he relished, for he had been ill and did not particularly desire to leave his children for any lengthy period. This is rather ironic in view of his long search for appointment by the King, even for foreign service. He preached a very impassioned sermon at Lincoln's Inn on the occasion of his departure, and also penned a Valediction. The dramatic imagery of this work has been previously noted, but Donne's illness and reticence for departure lend a sincerity to his brooding upon death and the dangers of this voyage. The large party accomplished nothing on its peace-making mission, and the trip kept Donne from England from May through December of 1619.

Walton comments that Donne returned from Germany "with his sorrows moderated, and his health improved; and there betook himself to his constant course of Preaching."<sup>12</sup> This is very much the story of 1620. There are several sermons from Lincoln's Inn extant, including a wedding sermon preached on the occasion of the marriage of Sir Francis Nethersole to the eldest daughter of Sir Henry Goodyer. It was only natural that Donne would conduct the

---

<sup>12</sup>Walton, p. 54.

ceremony for the daughter of such a good friend.

A significant turn came in 1621. On August 26, the Bishop of Exeter died, and Valentine Cary, Dean of St. Paul's, was promoted to his place. Walton gives the amusing anecdote of how Dr. Donne was appointed in Cary's place:

. . . the King sent to Dr. Donne, and appointed him to attend him at dinner the next day. When his Majesty was sate down, before he had eat any meat, he said after his pleasant manner, Dr. Donne, I have invited you to Dinner; and, though you sit down with me, yet I will carve to you a dish that I know you love well: for knowing you love London, I do therefore make you Dean of St. Pauls; and when I have dined, then do you take your beloved dish home to your study; say grace there to your self, and much good may it do you.<sup>13</sup>

There is debate over whether or not Donne had to make any payment for the appointment. Though the practice was common, there is no evidence that it was done in this case. Donne's election and installation took place on November 22, 1621. His appointment as a Prebend was somehow delayed until August, 1622.

Donne resigned his place as Reader at Lincoln's Inn and made a presentation to the society of a six-volume edition of the Vulgate. His last regular sermon for them was Ascension Day (May 30), 1622. He did return on the same day in 1623 to preach the dedication service for the new chapel. He had helped to lay the cornerstone.

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 54-55.

It was as Dean of St. Paul's that Donne was to make his way into ecclesiastical history and spread the gracious influence of his scholarly and increasingly warm and powerful preaching. The organization of St. Paul's was interesting. It followed a French custom in dividing the choir into thirty stalls, each one inscribed with the opening verses of a psalm. Each stall was assigned to a Prebend of the Cathedral, and he recited his group of psalms daily, so that the entire Psalter was offered each day in praise to God. The prebendaries were named by the manor that gave the endowment for that priest. Donne received the Prebendary of Chiswick.

The responsibilities of the Cathedral were extensive, though there were many posts assigned to meet them. The landholdings and leases required careful supervision and Donne seems to have accomplished this with integrity. Equally demanding was the whole matter of nomination to receive benefices, especially the large number of non-residential livings that became available from time to time. Donne reacted in appropriate conscience against the simony of time, although he was to hold several rectories before his death. He did make sincere efforts to minister in these parishes and he also spoke out in a fashion so vigorous that it would have been ludicrous had he not been reasonably free from blame in this regard.

His preaching responsibilities as Dean were certainly not

burdensome. He was expected to preach in the Cathedral on Christmas, Easter and Ascension Day. As Prebend of Chiswick he preached on Whit Monday. He did preach more often, since we have his sermons from the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul (January 25) and Candlemas Day (February 2). He also preached a series of sermons on the psalms which were his assignment for daily reading as a Prebendary.

Preaching was his primary responsibility, both in fact and in his own concept of his gift and ministry. It is not difficult to trace the change in his preaching from Lincoln's Inn to St. Paul's, and this will be explored in greater depth. Suffice it to say at this point that he preached now with greater authority and conviction as a spokesman of the Church, and that he was conscious of a wider range of understanding or the lack of it in his auditory; his discourse was accordingly more simple and direct.

As Dean of St. Paul's, Donne was also called upon in an increasing way to act as a judge in ecclesiastical disputes, and his legal acumen was valued and utilized. Such courts were often combinations of civil and ecclesiastical authority. In such circumstances the good Dean moved with ease.

It has been mentioned that this position solved the financial problems that plagued Donne for so long. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that he not only now met his obligations but was

privileged to become the gracious donor. Donne resigned Keyston when he became Dean, and he also refused to accept any further funds from his father-in-law. (He had been receiving £80 a year in lieu of dowry). He received the rectory of Blunham in 1622 and St. Dunstan's in 1624. From all these sources and additional moneys from various extra services, he probably received more than £2,000 per year.<sup>14</sup> This did not come all at once, but rapidly enough to keep him from any kind of desperation, and generously enough to mark him as affluent.

In 1623 Donne fell ill, and from this experience came some of the most famous and moving of Donne's writings. He took sick in November, succumbing to an epidemic that had swept the city. It was a kind of relapsing fever, sudden and extremely debilitating. The convalescence was slow, and the danger of relapse was extreme. During that time he made a careful record of his experiences and compiled a book published under the title Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and Severall Steps in My Sickness. The book appeared in early 1624, probably before Donne had recovered fully from the illness. There are twenty-three sections, each one being a meditation, an expostulation, and a prayer. It is easy to trace Donne's illness in the text. He was racked by sleeplessness and

---

<sup>14</sup>Bald, p. 426.

haunted by the tolling of the bells. There were many deaths in London at the time. The three sections on the tolling of the bells are most famous. The bells remind him he is mortal. Then they insist that he must die, and finally they tell him he is dead already. It is in the second of these devotions, number seventeen in the work, that the often quoted section occurs:

No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the Lesse, as well as if a Promotorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde: And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls for thee.<sup>15</sup>

It was during the same illness that he wrote the Hymne to God the Father, another very well known work. Its depth and sincere emotion deserve quotation:

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,  
Which was my sin, though it were done before?  
Wilt thou forgive that sin through which I run,  
And do run still, though still I do deplore?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done;  
For I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won  
Others to sin, and made my sins their door?  
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun  
A year or two, but wallowed in a score?  
When thou has done, thou hast not done;  
For I have more.

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 453.



I have a sin of fear, that when I've spun  
 My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;  
 But swear by thyself that at my death thy Son  
 Shall shine as he shines now and heretofore;  
 And having done that, thou hast done;  
 I fear no more.

Walton recounts the significance of this Hymn, which Dr. Donne must have intended for musical setting:

I have the rather mentioned this Hymn, for that he caus'd it to be set to a most grave and solemn Tune, and to be often sung to the Organ by the Choristers of St. Pauls Church, in his own hearing; especially at the Evening Service, and at his return from his Customary Devotions in that place, did occasionally say to a friend, The words of this Hymn have restored to me the same thoughts of joy that posset my Soul in my sickness when I composed it. And, O the power of Church-musick! that Harmony added to this Hymn has raised the Affections of my heart, and quickened my graces of zeal and gratitude; and I observe, that I always return from paying this publick duty of Prayer and Praise to God, with an unexpressible tranquillity of mind, and a willingness to leave the world.<sup>16</sup>

This is the only intimation of any musical interest in Donne, though it is very positive.

There is debate over whether or not this is the occasion of his writing, Hymne to God, my God, in my Sicknesse. Walton in his second edition, added the date, March 23, 1630, to this poem. However, a transcript of the work is among the papers of Sir Julius Caesar endorsed, "D. Dun Dene of Pauls/his verses in his greate/sickness./ in Decemb. 1623."<sup>17</sup> The poem is a masterful

---

<sup>16</sup>Walton, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. John Donne, Divine Poems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), Appendix E.

contemplation of death in the serenity of faith and the imagination of a poet. It is more dramatic to consider it the final statement of the Dean, and when one reads his last sermon, the poem is not an artistic impossibility. Yet Donne's awareness of death was keen in this earlier illness, and the poem is not inappropriate. To some literary sleuths, the title "in my Sicknesse" might indicate that Donne survived to health rather than expired.

In March of 1624 Donne received the vicarage of St. Dunstan's--in-the-West from the Earl of Dorset. His status as a royal chaplain allowed him to have two benefices with the cure of souls. These were St. Dunstan's and Blunham. His other offices, his deanery, prebend, and rectory in Sevenoaks, were benefices without the cure of souls and required no approval. Donne set about this responsibility with warmth and vigor. His preaching must have made the people of this parish realize the seriousness with which he addressed the task.<sup>18</sup>

The death of James I in March, 1625, marked the last great epoch in Donne's life. He was now fifty-three years old, at the height of his prowess, on good terms with powers civil and ecclesiastical. He was yet to come forth with some of his finest preaching

---

<sup>18</sup>Two sermons of 1624 at St. Dunstan's are in John Donne, The Sermons of John Donne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), VI, Nos. 3 and 4.

and to minister with meaning and insight to his parishoners.

A serious calamity occurred in the first year of the reign of Charles I. There was a heavy recurrence of the plague. Donne was ill just prior to the outbreak and had left London for Chelsea when the situation became more desperate. The number of deaths increased steadily through the summer, and all who could leave the city did so. Donne stayed at the home of Sir John Danvers, and came to know even more intimately his long-time friend and patroness, Lady Danvers, formerly Magdalen Herbert. Her household was amazingly well-ordered and incredibly pious. Lady Danvers not only saw to the reading of morning and evening prayers, but the household participated in the Sunday services and all others that might be conducted in the church.

The plague finally abated and Donne returned to London. His preaching in January, 1626, at St. Dunstan's was a poignant reminder of the ravages of the illness.<sup>19</sup> His text, "For there was not a house where there was not one dead," could hardly fail of its mark. The year ahead was extremely busy for Donne. Donne was active during the year as Prolocutor of the lower house of Convocation, a gathering that met concurrently with Parliament for the Church of England. He delivered a most learned address in Latin to this body.

---

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., VI, No. 18.

There are more sermons extant from the year 1626 than any other. Donne's popularity was never greater. Perhaps something of his insightful concern is reflected in his preaching following the plague. Many London pulpits resounded to thundering denunciations of the body politic and the prophetic announcement that God had properly judged a wicked people once more. Donne, on the other hand, was a preacher of compassion, consoling with the comfort and joy of the gospel and ameliorating any undue despair.

Donne fulfilled all his regular preaching duties and also managed to resolve a rather nasty family quarrel that had arisen with Edward Alleyn, his son-in-law, husband of Constance. Alleyn had bitterly accused Donne of reneging on various commitments, including a proposed loan of £500. After a great deal of haggling, the whole affair was settled. And none too soon, it turned out, since Alleyn died in November, 1626. This was, other than Donne's altercation with Sir George More over the marriage of his daughter, the only occasion in his life of genuinely strained relationships with any of his immediate circle.

This period marks the saddening losses of close friends by death. He also lost his daughter Lucy in January of 1627. Some of the melancholy seems to affect his preaching of the period. However, his most unhappy experience was the displeasure of the King that was

incurred by his preaching at Whitehall on April 1, 1627. This came as a shock to Donne, for he had worked very hard on a particular section of the sermon which discussed the responsibilities of subjects to monarchs. He had with an assumed modesty suggested that he did not normally discuss such matters and then went on to an exhortation to civil obedience that could not but warm the heart of any king. But this was in vain, for Donne had foolishly used a most inept illustration that touched the King quite personally. Donne commented that the Church did not have a perfect history but this fact need not presently condemn her, just as a king might have a wife whose early religious training had been from an unhappy source. Charles has married a French princess, and the parallel was unfelicitous, to say the least. The King ordered the sermon examined by Bishop Laud, who led the High Church party then in royal favor. Laud reported the matter favorably, although Donne had a special audience with the King and evidently asked forgiveness. The incident was subsequently forgotten.

Other losses marked the year 1627. Both Lady Bedford and Lady Danvers died within a few days of each other, and Sir Henry Goodyer had preceded them by a few weeks. Christopher Brooke became ill in December, and he died in February of 1628.

Matters were also sharpening in the contention of Puritan against Anglican, and Donne turned more and more to discussions of

this in his preaching. He tended to be more tolerant of Romish practices, and struggled constantly to maintain the via media.

In 1628 Donne was occupied for a period by the appointment of a new Bishop of London. Bishop Mountain, elegant, worldly and inefficient was finally removed by translation to the archbishopric of York, and Laud, the disciplinarian and royal favorite was immediately appointed to the London Diocese. Donne administered the see during the brief vacancy in July.

Now Donne begins a period of more physical aggravations, although there is no clear evidence of any real failure on his part, or any diminution of his mental powers. By the summer of 1630 he was certainly high on the list of those being considered for promotion to a bishopric, and had he lived, this would most likely have been his lot.

Donne preached what turned out to be his last sermon in St. Paul's on Easter Sunday, March 28, 1630. The previous summer was spent as usual in visits and preaching at Blunham and Sevenoaks. In August he visited his daughter, Constance, now married to Samuel Harvey. He was accompanied by another daughter and his mother, who had been living for several years in the Deanery. Here Donne became ill with a fever that had evidently been recurring with a certain regularity every six months or so. The illness was serious. Walton comments:

. . . he there fell into a Fever, which with the help of his constant infirmity (vapours from the spleen) hastened him into so visible a Consumption that his beholders might say, as St. Paul of himself, He dyes daily; and he might say with Job, My welfare passeth away as a cloud, the days of my affliction have taken hold of me, and weary nights are appointed for me.<sup>20</sup>

Donne was unable to meet any preaching appointments that fall, but felt enough recovered to be in London to preach on Candlemas Day (February 2). He also hoped to preach at Court for the first Friday in Lent as well as at St. Dunstan's. He was now feeling his illness constantly, but with mental powers not at all abated. He spent a great deal of his time in writing out and editing his sermons, and in December, 1630, he made his will. This is an extensive document, reflecting Donne's legal training. He provided for his mother, which proved unnecessary, since she passed away in January of 1631. Strangely enough, both Jessopp<sup>21</sup> and Gosse<sup>22</sup> state that she outlived Donne by a year, even though Walton indicates that she died before him, and the parish records of the church at Barking describe her burial on January 28, 1631.

---

<sup>20</sup>Walton, p. 60.

<sup>21</sup>Augustus Jessopp, Life of John Donne (London: Methuen, 1905), p. 195.

<sup>22</sup>Gosse, II, 295.

<sup>23</sup>Bald, p. 524.

Donne came to London in order to preach at Whitehall on the first Friday of Lent, February 25, 1631.<sup>24</sup> Walton cannot be surpassed in his description of the last events in Donne's life, especially the preaching of this last sermon:

And, when to the amazement of some beholders he appeared in the Pulpit, many of them thought he presented himself not to preach mortification by a living voice; but mortality by a decayed body and a dying face. And doubtless, many did secretly ask that question in Ezekiel: Do these bones live? or, can that soul organize that tongue, to speak so long time as the sand in that glass will move towards its centre, and measure out an hour of this dying mans unspent life? Doubtless it cannot: and yet, after some faint pauses in his zealous prayer, his strong desires enabled his weak body to discharge his memory of his pre-conceived meditations, which were of dying: the Text being, To God the Lord belong the issues from death. Many that then saw his tears, and heard his faint and hollow voice, professing they thought the Text prophetically chosen, and that Dr. Donne had preach't his own Funeral Sermon.<sup>25</sup>

Donne returned home exhausted and had to rest quietly for a day or two. Walton reports his response to a friend who questioned his state of mind:

I am not sad, but most of the night past I have entertained myself with many thoughts of several friends that have left me here, and are gone to that place from which they shall not return; And, that within a few days I also shall go hence, and be no more seen. And my preparation for this change is become my nightly

---

<sup>24</sup>For some unexplained reason, R. C. Bald gives Feb. 12, 1631, as the date of the first Friday of Lent in his biography of Donne, p. 525. On p. 526 he writes: "On Friday, 25 February Donne duly came to the chapel at Whitehall to preach."

<sup>25</sup>Walton, pp. 74-75.



meditation upon my bed, which my infirmities have now made restless to me. But, at this present time, I was in a serious contemplation of the providence and goodness of God to me: to me who am less than the least of his mercies; and looking back upon my life past, I now plainly see it was his hand that prevented me from all temporal employment; and that it was his Will I should never settle or thrive till I entered into the Ministry; in which, I have now liv'd almost twenty years (I hope to his glory) and by which I most humbly thank him, I have been enabled to requite most of those friends which shewed me kindness when my fortune was very low, as God knows it was: and (as it hath occasioned the expression of my gratitude) I thank God most of them have stood in need of my requital. I have liv'd to be useful and comfortable to my good Father-in-law Sir George More, whose patience God hath been pleased to exercise with many temporal Crosses: I have maintained my own Mother, whom it hath pleased God after a plentiful fortune in her younger days, to bring to a great decay in her very old age. I have quieted the Consciences of many that have groaned under the burthen of a wounded spirit, whose prayers I hope are available for me: I cannot plead innocency of life, especially of my youth: But I am to be judged by a merciful God, who is not willing to see what I have done amiss. And, though of myself I have nothing to present to him but sins and misery; yet, I know he looks not upon me now as I am of my self, but as I am in my Saviour, and hath given me even at this present time some testimonies by his Holy Spirit, that I am of the number of his Elect: I am therefore full of expressible joy, and shall dye in peace.<sup>26</sup>

This is a noble confidence, both of the providence of God in the guidance of his life's work and in the sufficiency of the redemptive work of Christ. Donne and his friends were well aware that he had preached his own funeral sermon, and the remaining weeks of Donne's life were largely occupied with the business of dying. This was neither macabre nor despairing for the people of the early seventeenth

---

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

century. Death was something Donne had looked on and contemplated for many years, and he would not now miss the ritual that expressed his faith and doctrine. His own sense of the dramatic was far too keen and his mind far too active to allow this event to be ordinary.

Dr. Fox, Donne's physician, prescribed the drinking of milk for twenty days as the proper medicine for a cure. Donne humored his friend by following this regimen for ten days, but then refused, avowing that ten more days were impossible, even if he were promised twenty more years of life as a result. Not only did he not fear death, he longed for the day of his dissolution.<sup>27</sup>

The question was raised then as to Donne's monument. Again Walton gives us what has to be a first-hand account of a most interesting incident:

A monument being resolved upon, Dr. Donne sent for a Carver to make for him in wood the figure of an Urn, giving him directions for the compass and height of it; and to bring with it a board of the just height of his body. "These being got: then without delay a choice Painter was got to be in a readiness to draw his Picture, which was taken as followeth. --Several Charcole-fires being first made in his large Study, he brought with him into that place his winding-sheet in his hand, and, having put off all his cloaths, had this sheet put on him, and so tyed with knots at his head and feet, and his hands so placed, as dead bodies are usually fitted to be shrowded and put into their Coffin, or grave. Upon this Urn he thus stood with his eyes shut, and with so much of the sheet turned aside as might shew his lean, pale, and death-like face, which was purposely turned toward the East, from whence he expected the second coming of

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

his and our Saviour Jesus." In this posture he was drawn at his just height; and when the Picture was fully finished, he caused it to be set by his bed-side, where it continued and became his hourly object till his death: and was then given to his dearest friend and Executor Doctor Henry King, then chief Residentiary of St. Pauls, who caused him to be thus carved in one entire piece of white Marble, as it now stands in that Church.<sup>28</sup>

A few days later Donne went permanently to his bed and summoned various friends for final farewells. He died on March 31 in a most saintly fashion. He was lucid and conversant to the last, prayed much and passed away so quietly that Walton notes his posture did not have to be altered by those who shrouded him.

His funeral was on April 3. He was buried in the Cathedral in the south aisle behind the choir. He had requested a private funeral, but this was not followed, and there were many distinguished mourners. The marble figure finally erected was most unusual, and copies of the motif began to appear in London immediately. The figure is slightly crouching, but Donne undoubtedly conceived of himself as not having fully emerged from the urn in resurrection. This seems borne out in his epitaph, which he composed.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>29</sup>Gosse, II, 282, translation of Francis Wrangham.

John Donne  
 Doctor of Divinity  
 after various studies pursued by him from his earliest years  
 with assiduity and not without success  
 entered into Holy Orders,  
 under the influence and impulse of the Divine Spirit  
 and by the advice and exhortation of King James  
 in the year of his Savior 1614, and of his own age 42,  
 Having been invested with the Deanery of this Church,  
 November 27, 1621  
 he was stripped of it by Death on the last day of March, 1631  
 and here, though set in dust, he beholdeth Him  
 Whose name is the Rising.

### Craftsmanship

The objective now presented is to examine the work of John Donne as a craftsman of the sermon. There are those who feel that in spite of Donne's prowess as a poet, perhaps the foremost of the metaphysical poets, his greatest work is reserved for his prose, and more especially, his preaching. Such evaluations are subjective and arbitrary, but there can be no doubt of the brilliance of Donne's homiletic efforts. The only person to compare with him at the beginning of his ministry was Lancelot Andrewes, and with Andrewes' death in 1625 Donne had no peer in an English pulpit. It is amazing that more of Donne was not published in his lifetime, and fortunate

that the care Donne exercised in compiling his sermons preserved so many of them for us.

### Donne's Concept of the Sermon

John Donne approached the task of preaching with a high view of its divine authorization and a realistic view of its purpose. We shall look at both.

We have already noted Donne's very serious view of the calling of a minister, and Donne's career makes it plain that he viewed preaching as the central task of the minister. In preaching on Matthew 9:13 he is discussing the call of Christ,

Now, this calling implies a voice, as well as a Word; it is by the Word; but not by the Word read at home, though that be a pious exercise; nor by the word submitted to private interpretation; but by the Word preached, according to his Ordinance, and under the Great Seal, of his blessing upon his Ordinance. So that preaching is this calling; and therefore, as if Christ do appear in any man, in the power of a miracle, or in a private inspiration, yet he appears but in weakness, as in an infancy, till he speak, till he bring a man to the hearing of his voice, in a settled Church, and in the Ordinance of preaching. (III, 157)

This sentiment is repeatedly explicit in Donne. He exulted in the task, especially when it allowed him the privilege of a consoling and liberating message:

First, then, Christ proposes in these words consolation; A Worke, then which none is more divine, nor more proper to God nor to those instruments, whom he sends to worke upon the soules and consciences of others. Who but my selfe can conceive the sweetness of that saluation when the Spirit of God sayes to me

in a morning. Go forth today and preach, and preach consolation, preach peace, preach mercy, And spare my people, spare that people whom I have redeemed with my precious Blood, and be not angry with them for ever; Do not wound them, do not grinde them, do not astonish them with the bitterness, with the heaviness, with the sharpness, with the consternation of my judgments. (VII, 133)

Donne had profound respect for the ordinance of preaching as well as delight in doing it. In one of his Prebend sermons on Psalm 65:5 he chides his congregation for their censuring of preachers and sermons:

All the Sermon is not God's word, but all the Sermon is God's ordinance, and the Text is certainly his word. There is no salvation but by faith, nor faith but by hearing, nor hearing but by preaching; and they that thinke meanliest of the Keyes of the Church, and speake faintliest of the Absolution of the Church, will yet allow, That those Keyes lock and unlock in Preaching; That Absolution is conferred or withheld in Preaching, That the proposing of the promises of the Gospel in preaching, is that binding and loosing on earth, which bindes and looses in heaven. (VII, 319-320)

Donne is convinced of the place of preaching, and has definite ideas of the purpose of the sermon. In a sermon preached for the marriage of the eldest son of Lord Herbert on November 19, 1627, Donne makes an interesting comment about sermons and lectures:

Now, in exercises upon such occasions as this, ordinarily, the instruction is to bee directed especially upon those persons, who especially give the occasion of the exercise; that is, upon the persons to bee united in holy wedlock: for, as that's a difference betweene Sermons and Lectures, that a Sermon intends Exhortation principally and Edification, and a holy stirring of religious affections, and then matters of Doctrine, and points of Divinity, occasionally, secondarily, as the words of the text may invite them; but Lectures intend principally

Doctrinall points, and matters of Divinity, and matters of Exhortation but occasionally, and as in a second place.  
(VIII, 95)

This distinction is further noted in an earlier sermon:

But yet neither am I willing to raise doubts, and leave the auditory unsatisfyed, and unsettled; we are not upon a Lecture, but upon a Sermon, and therefore we will not multiply variety of opinions. (II, 320)

Put this all together and it means that a sermon is serious business. This was ultimately true because the salvation of souls was at stake, and Donne has severe words for any who in preaching or hearing frustrate or trivialize this primary purpose. It will become obvious that Donne has a broad definition of that which edifies, since his sermons are filled with the opinions of the Fathers and various theological minutiae, though not without purpose.

### Preparation

It has already been observed that Donne was a diligent student. There is no reason to distrust Walton when he notes that from his student days Donne developed the habit of early morning study, often from as early as four and never concluding before ten. Walton further notes that through the process of this study Donne "left the resultance of 1400 authors, most of them abridged and analyzed with his own hand."

This studious approach was given with great intensity to his

sermonizing:

The latter part of his life may be said to be a continued study; for as he usually preached once a week, if not oftener, so after his Sermon he never gave his eyes rest, till he had chosen out a new Text, and that night cast his Sermon into a form, and his text into divisions; and the next day betook himself to consult the Fathers, and so commit his meditations to his memory, which was excellent.<sup>30</sup>

This really does not reveal the actual condition of the sermon by the time the good Dean sought to preach it. The question is whether or not Donne wrote out the sermon and memorized the major portion of it. In view of Donne's comments on his editing of the sermons, this does not seem to be the case. For the sermons to be extemporary amplifications of the division of the text is more attractive for the preacher, although the arduousness of the work would not necessarily discourage Donne.

However, it is true that Donne intended to publish his sermons, at least some of them. During the plague of 1625, while he was at the Danvers' house in Chelsea, he wrote in a letter:

I have reviewed as many of my Sermons, as I had kept any notes of; and I have written out a great many, and hope to do more. I am already come to the number of 80: of which my sonne, who I hope, will take the same profession, or some other in the world of middle understanding, may hereafter make some use.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup>Walton, p. 67.

<sup>31</sup>John Donne, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose (London: Nonesuch Press, 1929), p. 489.



The important thing to observe is that Donne does not indicate that his sermons had been written out originally. He evidently had notes adequate to bring back to him the content of the sermons, but in almost every instance, the full manuscript is made subsequent to the preaching of it. There is no way to evaluate just how much of a change in content this brought about. How different was the completed manuscript from the sermon as originally given? The best estimate would appear to be that it is indeed similar. To this observer, the sermons, though extremely literary and well-phrased, are written for the ear, and they have the kind of rhythm and rhetoric, even repetition that mark effective communication for the "auditory," as Donne so often refers to it. In passing we may note that the quantity of work of which Donne was capable is indicated in this compilation of sermons at Chelsea. Eighty sermons in five months is an average of one every two days, and just the copying of one sermon is estimated to take about eight hours.<sup>32</sup>

This whole procedure is confirmed by Donne's comments about requests for copies of his more significant efforts. He writes to Thomas Roe, who had requested a copy of his sermon on the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot:

---

<sup>32</sup>Bald, p. 480, fn. 2.

I would I could also send your lordship a copy of that; but that one which, also by commandment I did write after the preaching, is as yet in his majesties's hand, and I know not whether he will in it, as he did in the other, after his reading thereof, command it to be printed; and whilst in that suspense, I know your Lordship would call it indiscretion to send out any copy thereof; neither truly am I able to commit that fault; for I have no copy.<sup>33</sup>

The only exception to the extended notes for the sermon and the manuscript following sequence is Donne's last sermon, "Death's Duel," or so the circumstances seem to dictate. The sermon was available virtually immediately, and the rapid deterioration of Donne's health following the preaching would make his work on it extremely difficult and therefore unlikely. It is so significant a work that it seems logical that Donne would have completed it in advance so that nothing would hinder its presentation.

There is clear evidence that shorthand had been developed and was practiced at the time, but there is nothing to indicate that Donne had this kind of help in compiling his sermons.<sup>34</sup>

In considering Donne's attitude toward preparation, it is appropriate to explore the whole matter of extemporaneous preaching. Donne prefers the carefully planned sermon for reason both of form and content. He concludes that such effort will produce a quality of

---

<sup>33</sup>Hayward, p. 475.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Evelyn M. Simpson, A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 261.

"sweetness" and "tenderness" that will have the desired gracious effects:

St. Augustine does not onely profess of himself, Non praetermitto istos numeros clausularum. That he studied at home, to make his language sweet, and harmonious, and acceptable to God's people, but he beleeves also, that S. Paul himselfe, and all the Apostles, had a delight, and a complacency and a holy melting of the bowels, when the congregation liked their preaching. (VIII, 149)

Donne also saw the problem that led to early demands in the Church for carefully prepared sermons. Commenting on I Thessalonians 4:11, he notes:

When the Apostle says, study to be quiet, me thinks he intimates something toward this, that the lesse we study for our Sermons, the more danger is there to disquiet the auditory; extemporall, unpremeditated Sermons, that serve the popular eare, vent, for the most part, doctrines that disquiet the Church. Study for them, and they will be quiet; consider ancient and fundamentall doctrines, and this will quiet and settle the understanding, and the Conscience.<sup>35</sup>(X, 174)

There is no substitute with Donne for diligent preparation:

Now, he that will teach, must have learnt before, many yeers before; And he that will preach must have thought of it before, many days before. Extemporall Ministers, that resolve in a day what they will be, Extemporall Preachers, that resolve in a minute, what they will say, outgo Gods Spirit, and make too much hast. It was Christs way; He tooke first Disciples to learne, and then, out of them, he tooke Apostles to teach. . . . Though your first consideration be upon the Calling, yet our consideration must be for our fitnessse to that Calling. (VI, 104)

---

<sup>35</sup>Donne betrays his weak Greek exegesis. The word has nothing to do with "study" as Donne uses it, even though he says Paul "intimates" it.

There was one extemporaneous sermon that drew Donne's approval, the words of the repentant thief.

This thief had premeditated nothing. But he is no more a precedent for extemporal preaching than he is for stealing. He was a Thief before, and he was an extemporal preacher at last: But he teaches no body else to be either. (I, 260)

### Delivery

What kind of preacher was Donne in the pulpit? It is rather obvious that he was a good one. His place as Dean of St. Paul's would hardly be given to a man who was inept, though this is not an impossibility. There were such in Donne's time. Yet there is evidence enough that Donne was a master in holding his congregation in rapt attention, though not without some problem.

To hold a congregation as Donne did was no small task. Donne regularly preached about one hour. He frequently mentions the running of "the glass" which he had with him in the pulpit. It is hard to know just how much attention he paid to it. The sermons are no clear indication. Because of Donne's editing they are of unequal length yet it seems probable that his actual time of preaching was fairly consistent.

There are some interesting observations about his preaching from a contemporary, Richard Brathwayte.<sup>36</sup> To him and his poet

---

<sup>36</sup>Quoted by Gosse, II, 234-235.

friends Donne seemed "Golden Chrysostom come to life again." Not all were pleased by the eloquence of the preacher, and disapproval was sometimes expressed, especially by the Puritans, by humming during the preaching. There would undoubtedly be those unable to follow the unique turns of mind and subtle wit of Donne, as will be later observed. Donne was a preacher for the aristocrats, although not in a snobbish fashion.

As might be expected, Walton gives an enthusiastic report on Donne's preaching style:

. . . preaching the Word so, as showed his own heart was possesst with those very thoughts and joys that he laboured to distill into others: A Preacher in earnest; weeping sometimes for his Auditory, sometimes with them; always preaching to himself, like an Angel from a cloud, but in none; carrying some, as St. Paul was, to Heaven in holy raptures, and inticing others by a sacred Art and Courtship to amend their lives; here picturing a vice so as to make it ugly to those who practised it; and a vertue so, as to make it be beloved ev'n by those that loved it not; and all this with a most particular grace and an unexpressible addition of comeliness.<sup>37</sup>

There is also an interesting similar comment on Donne's preaching that is rather poorly being followed by Walton in the above and is misquoted by Gosse. It is by John Chudleigh, of Ashton:

He kept his loves, but not his objects; wit  
He did not banish, but transplanted it;  
Taught it his place and use, and brought it home  
To Pietie which it doth best become;

---

<sup>37</sup>Walton, p. 49.

Tell me had ever pleasure such a dresse,  
 Have you known crimes so shap'd? or lovelinesse  
 Such as his lips did cloth religion in?  
 Had not reproofe a beauty passing sin?  
 Corrupted nature sorrowe'd when she stood  
 So neare the danger of becomming good,  
 And wish'd our so inconstant eares exempt  
 From pietie that had such power to tempt:  
 Did not his sacred flattery beguile  
 Men to amendment? <sup>38</sup>

The statements are extravagant, but tell us something of Donne's personal magic.

This holding of an audience was no easy matter at St. Paul's, for the circumstances were anything but conducive to good listening, and therefore, good preaching. The cathedral was a popular meeting place for Londoners, especially because of the weather. Services went on in the choir behind the screens, in itself a spacious area, but the nave and transepts buzzed with the sounds of conversation and passage. Goods were carried through, business was transacted, children played games, all creating noise, "which many tymes suffereth not the preacher to be heard in the Quayre."<sup>39</sup> Donne evidently made some motions to stop this kind of action, but without

---

<sup>38</sup> John Donne, The Poems of John Donne (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 364.

<sup>39</sup> John Sparrow (ed.), Documents Illustrating the History of St. Paul's Cathedral, Camden Society, N. S., XXVI (1880), 131, quoted by Bald, p. 403.

much success. It forms a strange contrast to the lofty proceedings and gifted preaching going on before the altar of St. Paul's.

### Homiletical Structure

What kind of sermons did Donne preach? There are one hundred and sixty extant, and this wealth makes possible an excellent evaluation. Donne is a traditionalist in homiletic structure, and his work is consistently the presentation and explication of a text. His texts are brief, and though he may involve the material surrounding his text, this is done in a purely secondary or casual fashion.

There is no set pattern for an introduction. At times Donne will spend some time on ideas or situations that set his text, but most of the time such discourse is virtually eliminated. It may well be that such comments are excised by his own editing. It is also to be remembered that the sermon was squarely set in a well-structured liturgy, and the whole concept of getting the attention of his hearers would not receive any great concern.

Often there is a kind of introductory discussion of his text by way of clarifying the reading or summarizing possible interpretations. The key words may be introduced and their definitions expounded with great pains.

This is followed by the divisio, which is the rather austere statement of the main points of the outline that Donne had decided

upon. It has been interesting to note that Donne often is more obscure in the development of the outline in the body of the sermon than in the divisio, and occasionally the relationship between the two is extremely clouded. Most of the time, however, he is faithful to his announced plan.

Some of the early sermons are divided on the basis of the senses of scripture, which shall be considered shortly, or the "historical" interpretation and then the application. His later work usually extracted the main idea of the text by means of grammatical claves (keys), which are simply series of questions identifying the important elements of the sentence. Or Donne may use such categories as modus (manner), res (matter), and sedes (place or location). This is a slightly more sophisticated way of asking the basic questions for all outlining procedure: who, what, when, where, why.<sup>40</sup> This structure is best summarized as per verba, and at all points the text is both left intact and used as a frame of reference for the preaching. This does not, however, indicate patent simplicity. Donne could get quite complex, especially when his imaginative use of imagery to unfold a single theme is exploited.

---

<sup>40</sup>Winfried Schleiner, The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970), p. 165; also Joan Webber, Contrary Music (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 165.



The works that attempted to guide the homiletics of the late sixteenth century were largely Puritan, since their call for simplicity was a defensive statement.<sup>41</sup> Donne was not innovative in his sermon structure, but his unique gifts affected strongly his outline. Within the traditional division of the text was included the suggestion for amplification, followed by application. With Donne this was an unnecessary distinction in most instances. His amplification was application. We shall have further occasion to explore this dominant quality of his homiletical work.

There is such variety within his structure that attempts to describe general classifications usually end up simple descriptions of one or two sermons of that particular genre. Donne will select an obscure passage and preach on it, or he will select a single figure in a text, or even create his own symbol.<sup>42</sup> He will often use some experience that is prominent in the minds of the auditory (marriage, death, Christian Year) and organize his ideas around this.

---

<sup>41</sup> Richard Bernard, The Faithfull Shepheard (London, 1607); Bartholomew Keckermann, Rhetoricae Ecclesiasticae Sive Artis Formandi et Habendi Conciones Sacras, 3rd ed. (Hanau, 1606); Andreas Gerardus Hyperius, The Practice of Preaching (London, 1577); Nicolaus Hemming, Pastor Sive Pastoris Optimus Vivendi Agendique Modus (Erfurt, 1585). For summary and biography, see W. Frazer Mitchell, English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962).

<sup>42</sup> One sermon (IX, No. 7) uses the letter Y as a kind of pattern for his ideas.

Donne does not seem in his printed sermons to work toward some type of climax or be concerned about the conclusion in a formal sense. This is partly due to the nature of Donne's treatment of his subject matter. Most of the time his concluding section will contain something approaching anagogical material, many times eschatological or Christological. It is almost as though the ascending quality would not be served by a return to the earlier material or too careful a review of the process that had brought him there. Again, it might be assumed that the spoken event had some remarks that would be dropped when put into manuscript. There are at times indications of a prayer or benediction to follow that is not written out, but in most instances the ending would have to be described as abrupt.

The structure is generally well-balanced, in that Donne has a fine sensitivity to the amount of discussion allocated to each point. There will also be occasion to note the careful syllogism of Donne's argument, influenced by his legal training. The impression on the reader of the sermons is primarily one of extreme order, of a thoroughness of study and dedication to the significance of the text that is usually gratifying, though sometimes bordering on the pedantic.

## Use of Scripture

### Texts

It is obviously necessary and profitable to survey the use of the Bible in Donne's preaching. Our first consideration is the text available to him and used by him. The basic scholarly work used by Donne was the Complutense, as he called it, a polyglot of Hebrew, Greek, Chaldean and Latin.<sup>43</sup> It is also apparent that Donne had several editions of Hebrew and Greek at his disposal. His Latin was the Vulgate, which he used profusely, in the style of Lancelot Andrewes. Donne's was an interesting and difficult time as far as vernacular versions were concerned. It is almost reminiscent of the plethora of translations available today. There were at least five English Bibles before him: Coverdale, the Great Bible, Geneva, the Bishops Bible and the new Authorized Version. He also makes one reference to Wyclif, but evidently did not use him regularly. The version used most frequently, although by no means exclusively, was the Authorized. The Geneva is referred to as "our former translation."

---

<sup>43</sup>The finest discussion of Donne's scripture sources is by Dom Cameron Allen, "Dean Donne Sets His Text," Journal of English Literary History, X (September, 1943), 208-229.

### Use of Hebrew and Greek

The review of Donne's life pointed out that at the time he began to consider the possibility of taking orders he directed himself to the study of Greek and Hebrew, knowing that such preparation was indispensable to such a task. When one reads the sermons there is adequate and even an overweening evidence of Donne's scholarly concern and expertise. This is far more obvious with his use of Hebrew than of Greek. There is frequent use of Hebrew, and Donne enjoys the shades of meaning possible in such Hebrews words as those used for God, or for man. He returns to these often in his messages. It comes as something of a shock to be confronted with his corresponding absence of Greek usages and meanings. Allen observes that in the eight hundred folio pages of the LXXX Sermons edition of Donne there are exactly seven different Greek words. This rather startling fact, and a careful study of the use Donne made of the languages, leads to this observation:

At no times does Donne seem to know as much Hebrew as Andrewes or even Hall, although he is more ostentatious in his use of it than either of them. My impression is that Donne has "small Hebrew and less Greek." <sup>44</sup>

This is not to say that Donne was careless in his examination of the material, although it does intimate that he was not the scholar

---

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 220.

that he might have been. This is probably an evaluation that does not take seriously enough the whole relationship of exegesis and preaching. Donne and his contemporaries certainly brought into the pulpit far more of their exegetical labors than could possibly be absorbed by an auditory of their time or that would be tolerated by an auditory of more recent times. To say that more textual comparisons and exegetical study through linguistic scholarship could have been done on the passages is not to say that Donne could not or did not do them. It is true that he did not consistently indicate extensive study of the texts in the original languages. To read his sermons is to know that he had enough Greek and Hebrew to make his way through the Fathers.

#### Biblical Sources for Texts

Sixteen years of preaching one-hour sermons produces a wide range of ideas, especially from a mind as fertile as Donne's. Some attempts have been made to classify Donne's sermons by subject. This usually produces a predominance of sermons on the subject of death and resurrection, failing to consider that our extant sermons include the entire series of Easter sermons from St. Paul's. Rather than attempt a subject classification, it may be interesting to

summarize the roster of extant sermon-texts by books of the Bible.<sup>45</sup>

Donne's scripture quotations are in roughly the same proportion, and his love for the Gospels, Psalms and Epistles becomes apparent:

Genesis	9	Cant.	2	Luke	3	Col.	2
Exodus	2	Isaiah	6	John	16	I Thes.	2
Deut.	2	Lam.	2	Acts	8	I Tim.	3
Judges	1	Ezekiel	3	Romans	4	Heb.	1
Esther	1	Hosea	2	I Cor.	8	James	1
Job	5	Amos	1	II Cor.	3	I Pet.	1
Psalms	34	Micah	2	Gal.	2	II Pet.	1
Prov.	4	Matt.	16	Eph.	1	I John	1
Eccles.	3	Mark	2	Phil.	1	Rev.	5

### Hermeneutics

We have already noted that Donne is essentially a textual preacher. Now we must consider the whole problem of his approach to and explication of that text. There is nothing more important for the understanding of homiletics than to determine the hermeneutics of the preacher. To start from the same text will not lead two preachers to the same conclusion. This is, of necessity, a rather complex problem, and there are many interrelated avenues that seem to demand exploration. However, this whole matter of the interpretation of scripture will be a proper introduction to the discussion of imagery in a subsequent section.

---

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Donne, The Sermons, X, 418-421.

Theological Guidelines. Donne's approach to scripture has to be set in a theological context. It can be understood that the authority of scripture was not in any sense questioned by Donne, or by his hearers. The problem of authority received vigorous debate when related to tradition or ecclesiastical power, but nothing from the Reformation or from Trent could come close to questioning the absolute quality of Biblical authority.

The Scripture is a Judge, by which God himself will be tryed. As the Law is our Judge, and the Judge does but declare what is Law, so the Scripture is our Judge, and God proceeds with us according to those promises and Judgements, which he hath laid down in the Scripture. (VIII, 281-282)

The infallible rule for faith and practice is certainly reinforced in a statement like this:

As much as Paradise exceeded all the places of the earth, do the Scriptures of God exceed Paradise. In the midst of Paradise grew the Tree of knowledge, and the Tree of life: In this Paradise, the Scripture, every word is both those trees, there is Life and Knowledge in every word of the Word of God. (VIII, 131)

However, it is obvious that an infallible Bible is still subject to hermeneutics that can produce widely divergent ideas. The first theological consideration to define the hermeneutic principles for Donne was the Vincentian Canon. St. Vincent of Lérins, a father of the fifth century, had written that all interpretations are to be examined under the requirement of having been held everywhere, at all times, and by all commentators. Such interpretations are truly

Catholic. Donne preached that individual interpretations of scripture must be consonant with "that which all Churches alwayes have thought and taught to be necessary to salvation" (III, 112-113).

But again, one asks, what Church is the one which shall be asked the hermeneutic question? Donne had earlier asked, "Show me, deare Christ, thy spouse so bright and cleare," and proceeded to examine the sectarian definitions that at that time puzzled him. But his answer in his sermons to this question transcends any geographical and sectarian concept. Donne is a genuine spokesman of the via media and is convinced that the Anglican Church represents a true catholicity. It is interesting to note that this presses on him no real demand to systematize, no requirement to select certain sources from which he can martial the particular ideas that can be characterized as the truly Anglican and therefore Catholic view. He seems to delight in the presentation of the varying views of the Fathers, and he evidently finds in this very multiplicity the rich heritage of the via media. Such a procedure allows the full and rich meanings of scripture to emerge in paradoxical harmony. We will discover that this is not in conflict with his understanding of the sense of scripture.

Exegetical Principles. If the theological context allows a great openness to interpretative statements, we must also consider



the ways by which Donne selected those interpretations. Many, probably most of these, are not new with Donne.

Donne follows in a long line of exegetes who specialized in elaborating the meanings of objects in their texts. In the twelfth century, Hugo of St. Victor spoke of this principle of signification when he said, "Holy Scripture excels by far secular knowledge in that in it not only the words but also the things have meaning."<sup>46</sup> Thus the things signified by the words can in turn be carriers of meaning, they can signify. The medieval concept can even be argued to be that every "thing" points to a meaning of a higher order, something spiritual. It is evident what reinforcement this can receive in the parabolic teaching of Jesus, or the creation of the world by the "Word" of God.

Medieval exegetes were extremely zealous in finding the properties of various things that could enhance the meaning. Much of this is traceable to St. Augustine:

In addition, an imperfect knowledge of things causes figurative passages to be obscure; for example, when we do not recognize the nature of the animals, minerals, plants or other things which are often represented in the Scriptures for the sake of an analogy. It is well known that a serpent exposes its whole body, rather than its head, to those attacking it, and how clearly that explains the Lord's meaning when he directed us to be

---

<sup>46</sup>Quoted by Schleiner, p. 170. The quotation is from Excerptiones allegoricae 2.3 (PL 177.205b).

"wise as serpents." We should, therefore, expose our body to persecutors, rather than our head, which is Christ. Thus the Christian faith, the head so to speak, may not be killed in us, as it would be if, preserving our body, we were to reject God! There is also the belief that having forced itself through a small opening in disposing of its old skin, the serpent gains renewed vigor. How well this agrees with imitating the wisdom of the serpent and stripping off the "old man." . . . A knowledge of the nature of the serpent, therefore, explains many analogies which Holy Scripture habitually makes from that animal; so a lack of knowledge about other animals to which Scripture no less frequently alludes for comparison hinders a reader very much.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the interpretation of the Bible is not merely dependent on a knowledge of the text, but on the knowledge of the "things."

This is not to say that Augustine is advocating a purely figurative interpretation. Here it must be made clear that the hermeneutic tradition begins with the literal meaning. The supremacy of the literal sense is argued by Augustine and Aquinas. Donne had no quarrel with it. The literal sense was considered basic and the only ground for establishing doctrine. Augustine had warned, "Figura nihil probat." The literal sense is the sense that the author intended, and, of course, the author ultimately was for the medieval theologian, the Spirit of God. St. Thomas had defined the literal sense as the intention of the author, but was quick to add that a

---

<sup>47</sup> Augustinus, Aurelius, "Christian Instruction," in his Writings of St. Augustine (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947), pp. 83-84.

multiplicity of meanings is not unfitting within the literal sense. Gregory the Great had enlarged on this principle, following the Augustinian discussion of "words," "things," and "signs." This brings an expansion of the literal sense, in that there is an inseparable parabolic or metaphorical sense within the literal sense.

This latitude within the literal sense seems to open it to diverse meanings while it is still described as literal. Yet Thomas Aquinas keeps the distinction between the literal and spiritual senses, and admits of variety in the possibilities of the spiritual senses. He suggests the moral, allegorical and anagogical. The first is ethical guidance; the second, the reflection of the New Testament in the Old; and the third, the signification of the eternal glory of heaven.<sup>48</sup>

Donne does not fit exactly into the medieval Augustinian-Thomistic pattern, though some portions of his hermeneutics might. We should also consider the background of English thought on this subject. Even before the Reformation began in England, the whole question of the scripture in the vernacular and its interpretation had been opened. The great protagonist was William Tyndale. In his work entitled The Obedience of a Christian Man, Tyndale discusses the traditional four senses of scripture. He has satirical jibes for

---

<sup>48</sup>Janie M. Mueller, Donne's Prebend Sermons (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 15-16.

Rome and the "chopological" meaning, but his main thrust is the reduction of the multiple senses into a unity of form and content:

They divide the scripture into four senses, the literal, tropological, allegorical and anagogical. The literal sense is become nothing at all: for the pope hath taken it clean away. . . . He hath partly locked it up with the false and counterfeited keys of his traditions, ceremonies, and feigned lies; and partly driveth men from it with violence of sword. . . . The tropological sense pertaineth to good manners (say they), and teacheth what we ought to do. The allegory is appropriate to faith; and the anagogical to hope, and things above. Tropological and anagogical are terms of their own feigning, and altogether unnecessary. For they are but allegories, both two of them; and this word allegory comprehendeth them both, and is enough. For tropological is but an allegory of manners; and anagogical, an allegory of hope. And allegory is as much to say as strange speaking, or borrowed speech: as when we say of a wanton child, "This sheep hath magots in his tail, he must be anointed with birchen salve"; which speech I borrow of the shepherds.

Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all . . . , whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. Neverthelater, the scripture useth proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense.<sup>49</sup>

This confidence in man's perceptions and understanding, this acceptance of the spiritual nature of the literal meaning and its ability to edify and instruct is a bold move in the history of

---

<sup>49</sup>Tyndale's first Prologue to the New Testament, published separately as "A Pathway into the Holy Cripture," and reprinted as William Tyndale, Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures (London: Parker, 1848), pp. 303-304. Quoted in Mueller, pp. 19-20.

interpretation. The regular canons hold, especially the discovery of the literal sense by the context and any similar text elsewhere in the scriptures.

However, the sixteenth century in England was an age of sermons and interpretations largely for controversial and polemical purposes. The emphasis of the period was on the defining of Anglo-Catholicism over against the doctrines and dogmas of the Continent. The great work by Hooker, Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, helped to chart the middle course between Rome and the Anabaptists. In their effort to defend Anglicanism, the English divines revived in a commendable fashion the Thomistic distinction between the necessary and indifferent matters of faith. This, in turn, led to greater concern for the non-controversial interpretation of scripture, especially in preaching. The emphasis of Tyndale and others on the literal sense of scripture and its supreme value was gradually tempered by an awareness that not all the problems about the Bible were in the imperfections of its expositors. Yet the developing Anglican view of scripture was still largely Augustinian, with its confidence that in the entirety of scripture was a coherence and completeness of divine revelation for faith and morals.

The procedures for understanding a text in this Augustinian tradition are clearly seen in the preaching of Lancelot Andrewes.

The printed apology for this method is probably best expressed by William Whitaker in his work, Disputatio de Sacra Scripture; contra huius temporis papistas, imprimis, Robertum Bellarminum Iesuitam . . . et Thomam Stapletonum. This was first published in 1588.

Whitaker opens up for the first time since Tyndale a formal challenge to the multiple senses of scripture. He identified these senses as four in number: Historical, which is also grammatical or literal, aetiological, analogical and allegorical. This is the Augustinian division, and Whitaker also gleans from Origen and others such mystical meanings as the tropological, the allegorical and the anagogical. Whitaker limits the meanings that really emerge from all these classifications to two. He labels the Jesuits as the proponents of these views, and then disclaims the whole distinction:

We concede such things as allegory, anagoge, and tropology in scripture; but meanwhile we deny that there are many and various senses. We affirm that there is but one true, proper and genuine sense of scripture, arising from the words rightly understood, which we call the literal: and we contend that allegories, tropologies, and anagoges are not various senses, but various collections from one sense, or various applications and accommodations of that one meaning.<sup>50</sup>

Whitaker does not regard this view as an Anglican novelty but a proper understanding of Aquinas, whom he cites:

---

<sup>50</sup> William Whitaker, A Disputation on Holy Scripture (London: Parker, 1849), p. 403. Quoted by Mueller, p. 26.

Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and the author of holy scripture is God, who comprehends all things together in his mind; there is nothing improper in saying that, even according to the literal sense, there are several meanings of scripture in one text.<sup>51</sup>

This may appear to be theological doubletalk, but its importance must be cast against the problem of the varying opinions and interpretations given by the Fathers, all of which bore authority. This was a definition of the task of hermeneutics in terms of the single and simple sense of the text. This is a far cry from an attempt to define the various meanings present with the assumption that they all share equally in the intention and authority of the text itself.

What is Donne's view of this important question? He speaks about the senses of scripture in three passages that are frequently quoted. One is in the Essays in Divinity, one in his Christmas sermon of 1621, and one in his Easter sermon of 1624. In all of these he insists on the supremacy of the literal sense. In the Essays he comments:

The word of God is not the word of God in any other sense than literall, and that also is not the literall, which the letter seems to present, for so to diverse understandings there might be diverse literall senses; but it is called literall to distinguish it from the Morall, Allegoricall, and the other senses.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>52</sup>Donne, Essays in Divinity, pp. 39-40.

The sermon of 1621 gives the more traditional, Augustinian slant to the problem:

And therefore though it be ever lawfull, and often times very usefull, for the raising and exalting of our devotion, and to present the plenty and abundance of the Holy Ghost in the Scriptures . . . to induce the diverse senses that the Scriptures doe admit, yet this may not be admitted, if there may be danger thereby, to neglect or weaken the literall sense it selfe. For there is no necessity of that spirituall wantonnesse of finding more then necessary senses; for, the more lights there are, the more shadows are also cast by those many lights. . . . So when you have the necessary sense, that is the meaning of the holy Ghost in that place, you have senses enow, and not till then, though you have never so many, and never so delightfull. (III, 176)

The statement in the Easter sermon is in reality an acknowledgment that there are allegories and figures in the Bible, and in such cases, the figurative sense is the literal sense.

The issue is easily confused. There are three factors in this matter of the use of scripture that we should now be prepared to understand and illustrate. The first is that Donne employs regularly the traditional concept of vox or verbum and res in dealing with objects and circumstances of scripture. We must remember that Donne accepted the fact that these various figures occurred under divine supervision for the edification of the hearer. Consider one of Donne's early sermons on Psalm 38:2: "For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore" (II, 49-71). To discover what is being taught in the use of arrows to describe the



calamities of the psalmist, Donne lists various properties of arrows: their velocity, they strike suddenly; they are alien, in that they are shot by others, no one shoots an arrow at himself; they are hardly discernible, and other similar items. In Donne's defense, he does not resort to the elaboration that can be found in earlier divines, but his development is highly drawn.

To note one other example, in a sermon on Genesis 32:10, Donne speaks about Jacob's staff with which he passed over the Jordan:

Hath this then been thy state with Jacob, that thou hast not onely been without the staff of bread, plenty, and abundance of temporal blessings, but without the staff of defence, that when the world hath snarl'd and barked at thee, and that thou wouldst justly have beaten a dog, yet thou couldst not finde a staff, thou hadst no means to right thy selfe? Yet he hath not left thee without a staff of support, a staff to try how deep the waters be, that thou art to wade through, that is thy Christian constancy . . . use that staff aright, and as Christ, who sent his Apostles without any staff of defense once, afterward gave them leave to carry swords, so . . . he will make thy staff a sword. (I, 280)

He moves beyond this for additional meanings for the staff. Various works available to Donne, such as the compilation by Melito, would give such an object and then list all the various qualities that should be considered. These encyclopedic sources were regularly employed by medieval preachers.

Since a thing has as many meanings as it has properties, and some things have both good and bad properties, it follows that

some things have both good and bad meanings. Thus a lion can figure both Christ and the devil, as can a serpent:

In the Scriptures, in which the word Light is very often metaphorically applyed, it is never applyed in an ill sence. Christ is called a Lyon, but there is an ill Lyon too, that seeks whom he may devour. Christ is the serpent that was exalted, but there is an ill serpent that did devour us all at once.  
(IV, 103)

Further examples of this type of exegesis are everywhere in Donne, though more prominent in his early works. Elaborate discussions of honey, ashes, ears and hearing, birds, horses, mules, nets, etc., show Donne following the lead, though in restrained manner, of the medieval exegetes.<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that this use of figure, the vox, the word, and the res, the thing and all it signifies, is not so much figurative interpretation of the scripture as it is the exploitation of the figures of scripture. It is true that there is something about a rock that made the psalmist think of God. Donne is in a tradition that found much more than stability in the rock, and did not hesitate to appropriate as much of such qualities as could be made useful. Such appropriation would hopefully be consistent with the intention of the Spirit. It would always be consistent with other scripture and with the objective of edification and help for the hearer.

---

<sup>53</sup>Cf. Schleiner, pp. 17-185, and Webber, p. 136.

We are led by this statement to a further observation on Donne's use of scripture. Donne cannot escape the charge of allegorizing, even though he will try to maintain the unity of meaning in the literal sense. Not enough attention has been given in this question to the nature of preaching as it relates to the problem of Donne's hermeneutics. There can really be no serious question as to the dominance in Donne of a kind of spiritual exegesis. Dennis Quinn is quite explicit: "It is most historical and most accurate to think of Donne's sermons as spiritual, or, specifically, tropological exegesis."<sup>54</sup> Winfried Schleiner is equally positive: "His is as outspoken a plea for the use and usefulness of scriptural allegory as one could expect from a Protestant pulpit."<sup>55</sup> However, the question should really be tied to what the preacher is trying to do. If he is adequately dominated by the desire to set in motion forces for moral change, if he is ultimately concerned with the ideas and actions of his congregation, then a tropological, or moral exegesis will inevitably take place. Any reader of the sermons will rapidly become aware of Donne's great objective of personal applicability. There is really nothing worthy of homiletical energy for Donne short of truth

---

<sup>54</sup>Dennis Quinn, "John Donne's Principles of Biblical Exegesis," Journal of English and German Philology, LXI (1962), 326.

<sup>55</sup>Schleiner, p. 196.

that speaks to the particulars of the contemporary scene. This demand for the hermeneutical leap is something for which Donne is consistently sensitive. The problem is one of degree, though that degree will be disciplined properly only when the true unity of meaning has been taken seriously. Donne attempted this, though often without success. It is possible to find Donne leaning on an exegetical procedure that takes multiple meanings as the given. It is also possible to see him in admirable restraint, trusting the direct and obvious meaning of the text. It is never possible to find Donne unconcerned with the application of his text in the most meaningful way to his hearers.

The third consideration in summarizing Donne's use of scripture is a reminder of his avowed commitment to the literal meaning of the text. In spite of all that has been said of Donne's free use of spiritual meanings and his penchant for personal application, he was convinced of the efficacy of the basic word of scripture. A sermon from Donne served essentially to convey the sense of scripture and by this to induce faith in the hearer:

That which Christ hath plainly delivered, is the exercise of my Faith; that which other men have curiously disputed, is the exercise of my understanding. . . . It is the text that saves us; the interlineary glosses, and the marginal notes, and the variae lectiones, controversies and perplexities, undo us.  
(III, 207-208)

Donne goes on in this passage to contrast the confusion that comes

from the writing of "man's hand" in contrast to the sure word of God in the Bible. This point is reinforced in a most significant fashion by an eminent critic of Donne, Helen Gardner:

Compared with other preachers of his Church and age, and certainly with those of the age preceding, Donne makes a great deal of reference to the mystical senses. It would be possible to amass a formidable number of quotations, and on their evidence argue, in all good faith, that Donne held the view which Professor Willey puts forward as the view of the age, and valued the mystical sense as the sweet kernel hidden in the husk of the literal. Such a view, however impressively supported by quotation, would, I believe, be false. Donne's prime concern is always to establish the literal sense of his text, which he defines more than once as "the principal intention of the Holy Ghost in that place." He has profited by the long struggles of the exegetes of the Middle Ages to distinguish the problem presented to the interpreter of Scripture by its figurative nature, from the problem of whether it has different senses. Like St. Thomas, he includes in the literal sense the figurative, metaphorical, and parabolic.<sup>56</sup>

One illustration of this is in order. In a sermon before the King on Job 16:17-19, Donne goes so far as to reject the application of the text to Christ, even though this had been done by Gregory the Great:

Difference of Expositions makes us stop here upon this inquisition in what affection Iob spake this . . . S. Gregory, according to his manner, through all this book, which is, to all Iobs sufferings to Christ, and to make Iob some kinde of type of Christ, makes no more of this, but that it is an adjuration of the earth, in the person and behalf of Christ, not to suck in, or smoother his blood, but that it might be notified, and communicated to all the world. And truly, this is a good use, but it cannot be said to be a good sense of the place, because it cannot consist with the rest of the words. (IX, 221)

---

<sup>56</sup>Helen Louise Gardner, The Business of Criticism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 136-137.

## Theology

We have already made reference to the theology that informed Donne's interpretation of scripture. That should now be amplified to include the theology reflected by the preaching itself. Donne was a preacher and not a systematic theologian. No one goes to Donne for a speculative theology. Donne's systematics are probably best expressed in Hooker. If there is not a theological corpus in Donne, there most certainly is a consistent appropriation of the great Anglican tradition, the via media. Donne's metaphysical style, which we shall consider, was uniquely adapted to this particular methodology, a cultivation of the Fathers that was not forced to come to a resolution in particulars. Donne wanted tradition without its errors, Aquinas without scholastic nonsense, and the Fathers without their excesses.

This demanded a rejection of Romanism that was most emphatic, though by the very nature of the via media such rejection had to be tempered, since no man could be dogmatic. "The best men are but Problematicall, only the Holy Ghost is Dogmaticall." The disease of Romanism for Donne was superfluity. Donne planted himself firmly on the Apostles' Creed and the Thirty-nine Articles; the Anglican Church was the church of the circumcision, divested of the accretions that Rome now made matters of dogma. In the sermon

of Easter, 1619, he says:

. . . nothing becomes a Christian better than sobriety; to make a true difference between problematicall, and dogmaticall points, betweene upper buildings, and foundations, betweene collaterall doctrines, and Doctrines in the right line: for fundamentall things, Sine haesitatione credantur, they must be beleaved without disputing; there is no more to be done for them, but beleaving; for things that are not so, we are to weigh them in two balances, in the balance of Analogy, and in the balance of scandall: we must hold them so, as may be analogicall, proportionable, agreeable to the Articles of our Faith, and we must hold them so, as our brother be not justly offended, nor scandalized by them; wee must weigh them with charity, for others weaknesse. Certainly nothing endangers a Church more, then to draw indifferent things to be necessary; I meane of a primary necessity, of a necessity to be beleaved De fide, not a secondary necessity, a necessity to be performed and practised for obedience: Without doubt, the Roman Church repents now, and sees now that she should better have preserved her selfe, if they had not defined so many particular things, which were indifferently and problematically disputed before, to bee had necessarily De fide, in the Council of Trent. (II, 203-204)

The role is reversed when Donne faces the Puritans and Separatists, for now it was the Anglicans who kept various matters which the Puritans felt to be accretions and indifferent. Rome did not cut off enough. Geneva cut too much, though this is over-simplification. Donne was strongly resistant of the rigidity he found in Geneva, especially on the doctrine of Predestination. He felt it dishonored God to assume that anyone was made for damnation, and he disliked even to argue about "Resistibility" and "Irresistibility" of Grace. He fell back on Aquinas: God has appointed all future things to be, but so as they are, that is, necessary things necessarily, and

contingent things contingently."<sup>57</sup>

Donne's statements toward both directions of the theological spectrum are explicit and sharp. Yet in comparison with the tenor of his day, he had a conciliating spirit:

Beloved, there are some things in which all Religions agree; The worship of God, The holinesse of life; And therefore, if when I study this holinesse of life, and fast, and pray, and submit my selfe to discreet, and medicinall mortifications, for the subduing of my body, any man will say, this is Papisticall, Papists doe this, it is a blessed Protestation, and no man is the lesse a Protestant, nor the worse a Protestant for making it, Men and brethren, I am a Papist, that is, I will fast and pray as much as any Papist, and enable my selfe for the service of my God, as seriously, as sedulously, as laboriously as any Papist. So, if when I startle and am affected at a blasphemous oath, as at a wound upon my Saviour, if when I avoyd the conversation of those men, that prophane the Lords day, any other will say to me. This is Puritanciall, Puritans do this, It is a blessed Protestation, and no man is the lesse a Protestant, nor the worse a Protestant for making it, Men and Brethren, I am a Puritan, that is, I will endeavour to be pure, as my Father in heaven is pure, as far as any Puritan. (IX, 166)

All this is not to say that Donne was a theologian by negation. This was an age of controversy, and there is ample evidence of this in Donne's preaching. Yet this is not the predominant note in Donne. Mueller observes that Donne maintained a theological equanimity, with virtually the same ideas at the end of his ministry as at the

---

<sup>57</sup>Quoted by Frank Kermode, John Donne (London: Longmans, Green, 1957), p. 31.



beginning.<sup>58</sup> Donne accepted without question the teaching of his church. He expected this kind of acceptance from his people. He is no theological innovator, but his genius does bring to that theology a freshness, an openness, and above all a vitality through imagery that makes his preaching so constantly challenging.

---

<sup>58</sup>William Mueller, John Donne, Preacher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 148.

## CHAPTER III

### POETIC VALUES IN DONNE'S PREACHING

It is difficult to know what our estimate of the poetic value of Donne's preaching would be if we were not possessed of his poetry. My contention will be that the poet Donne shines in his preaching with unquestioned brilliance. It must be remembered that Donne's poetry was not published until after his death. We have already noted the source of embarrassment he found in some of his early writing. It was certainly not clerical in vein. The interest in Donne as a poet was no doubt enhanced by his eminence as a preacher; only a few artists combine two careers that are at the same time so different and yet so complementary. Grierson notes that "Donne is the only English poet of the first rank who is also a great orator."<sup>1</sup> It must be assumed that the brilliance of the poetic gift was not lost in the transition to the pulpit. One is reminded of the paradigm of St. Paul, to whom Donne often fondly referred, who brought to his apostolic office the same zeal and dedication that had marked his previous

---

<sup>1</sup>John Donne, The Poems of John Donne (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. xlii.

career as a persecutor. It stood him and the Kingdom of God in good stead.

### Metaphysical Poetry

If we believe that Donne's role as a poet affected his preaching, our first task is to look at him more carefully in that role.

Donne was a poet of vigorous and direct words, abrupt openings, unpolished yet unusually felicitous phrases. In his poetry, Donne is arguing, talking, expostulating, almost playing with his thoughts, while never affecting a polished eloquence or surrendering himself to the pure delight of song. He is normally classed with a school known as the "metaphysical" poets. The roster usually includes Herbert, Cranshaw, Vaughan and Traherne. This category is not to be confused with the normal use of metaphysics. The idea seems to rest in the practice of these authors to seek for images and figures that are "beyond nature," or more appropriately, perhaps, beyond the expected figure that seems asked for by the very nature of what is being contemplated. This introduces into the whole matter a question of cleverness, and a particular kind of learnedness. It would appear that this approach would be especially attractive when the "new philosophy" that followed the Copernican revolution and the Renaissance was opening new possibilities of definition and understanding.

The tendency of the metaphysical poets, and especially Donne, was to react vigorously against the segregation of the sublime from the commonplace, which was the prevalent form of idealization or romanticism in poetry.

This approach of poetry has not been received with even-handed delight. Dryden was the first to survey the work and pronounce it bad:

(Donne) affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love. . . . Would not Donne's Satires, which abound with so much wit, appear more charming, if he had taken care of his words, and of his numbers.<sup>2</sup>

Samuel Johnson was even more scathing. In an essay entitled "Metaphysical Wit,"<sup>3</sup> Johnson identifies the metaphysical poets as men of learning whose whole endeavor was to show that learning. Johnson concludes that they wrote verses, not poetry, and that by their failure to represent the operations of the mind or reflect the forms of matter, they have defied the Aristotelian canon of poetry as an imitative art.

---

<sup>2</sup>John Dryden, Essays of John Dryden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900), II, 102.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Kermode (ed.), Discussions of John Donne (Boston: Heath, 1962), pp. 7-8.

## Metaphysical Wit

It has been necessary to introduce into the discussion of the metaphysical poets the principle of "wit." This is perhaps the identifying mark of metaphysical poetry, although like other attempts at criticism, it is not always discrete enough to be helpful.

What is "wit?" The possibility of confusion can be seen in this description from a typical source on literary criticism:

The word "wit," which recurs so inevitably in any description of the metaphysical and neo-classic styles, is one of the most bewildering, and yet one of the most important, in the 17th-century critical vocabulary. Sometimes it means "general intelligence"; sometimes it means "repartee"; sometimes it means "recondite learning"; sometimes any work of literature or amusement. Sometimes it includes a concept called "judgment."<sup>4</sup>

In Johnson's essay already noted, he identifies wit as discordia condors, a combination of dissimilar images, or the discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Because of this disjunction, Johnson assumes that it is not in the province of the metaphysical poet to move the affections, since he is caught up in the task of employing something unexpected, something surprising. He writes as a beholder and not a partaker, and he wants to say what had not been said before. Donne achieves the surprise of wit in

---

<sup>4</sup>M. H. Abrams (ed.), The Norton Anthology of English Literature (New York: Norton, 1968), I, 1289.

various ways. At times it is sudden, or it may be delayed, as in irony. He often uses surprising paradox, or ingenious similitudes, or combinations of such means. Consider the first line of his poem: "Now thou hast loved me one whole day," or the attempt at a discussion of the unifying dynamics of love through a flea that had bitten both lovers. In the most unusual ways, Donne led the school of metaphysical poets in the development of their own peculiar wit.<sup>5</sup>

The modern poet and essayist, T. S. Eliot, has been a source of new interest in the work of the metaphysical poets.<sup>6</sup> This work he sees as the accomplishment of men who were intellectual poets, but to whom thought was an experience that modified sensibility. These poets "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience." Eliot does not accept, therefore, the idea that the heterogeneous forms yoked together by the metaphysical poets do not necessarily join. Eliot contends that the analysis of the metaphysical poets, brought about by dissociation and re-structuring, produced a valid and varied unity and re-creation of thought and feeling. He goes so far as to maintain that the change in poetry during and after the seventeenth century from

---

<sup>5</sup>George Williamson, The Proper Wit of Poetry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 35.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in his Selected Essays, 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1938).

intellectual to reflective was not an improvement. The reader of Eliot will certainly see Donne's ghost much more readily than Tennyson's.

This is to say that it is possible to view this intellectual resourcefulness as a great contribution rather than an aberration in the field of literature. Coleridge speaks enthusiastically of the metaphysical genius as "wonder-exciting vigor, intenseness and peculiarity of thought, using at will the almost boundless stores of a capacious memory, and exercised on subjects where we have no right to expect it--this is the wit of Donne."<sup>7</sup>

What is germane in this discussion is that Donne's development as a poet was especially significant in marking his treatment of theological material in his preaching. The metaphysical poet was characterized by the utilization of new and exciting means of translating experience. As Arthur Synons noted, "it offers a rapture in which the mind is supreme, a reasonable rapture."<sup>8</sup> This challenge and freedom to harness thought to feeling and to be open to the expanding realities of the world as new vehicles for this thought,

---

<sup>7</sup> Roberta F. Brinkley, Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1955), p. 526.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Synons, "John Donne," Fortnightly Review, n. s. , LXVI (1899), 734-745, quoted by Kermode, p. 32.

created a literary milieu for Donne that had an obvious and amazing potential.

### Donne's Imagery

The point at which Donne as a poet becomes most apparent in Donne the preacher is in his brilliant and abundant imagery. It is only a reading of the sermons with this in mind that can convey this artistry in Donne, but it nonetheless can receive some analysis and inspection which might prove enlightening.

It is here being assumed that metaphor is the language of poetry. This is so because poetry must produce its insight by the turns and shades of language, arresting, enticing, demanding, --the sudden juxtaposition that illuminates in both unexpected and delightful fashion. One of the characteristics of metaphor is boldness, since the metaphor violates the expectation created by the word used. Thus, "the ship plowed the sea" brings an unexpected verb for the noun, ship. The "fire of love" demands an adjustment from the anticipated characteristics of flame and smoke. In order to speak intelligently of the parts of the metaphor, the subject (ship, love) is called the "tenor," and the figure used, i. e., that which the subject<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Much of this discussion may be further considered in the work of Winfried Schleiner, The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons (Providence: Brown University Press, 1973), pp. 3-12.



resembles (plow, fire) is called the "vehicle."

If a metaphor is constructed by means of a contextual meaning that differs from a lexical meaning, then it follows that there is some point at which the distance or uniqueness of the vehicle becomes of such a disparate quality that it violates rather than informs. The "striking" quality of a metaphor would be determined by the boldness with which the image is formed. The principle which regulates the propriety of figurative discourse is called "decorum." It is obvious that the establishing and defining of the principle of decorum is somewhat subjective. It is usually decided by a consensus of those who by experience and artistry seem best qualified, but there is always room for difference, and that room never seems to lack occupants.

How do Donne and the metaphysical poets come out in the whole matter of decorum? It is Rosemond Tuve in her book, Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery, who leads in the contention that medieval principles of decorum very much hold for metaphysical poetry.<sup>10</sup> The argument is forcefully presented that the Renaissance praised "darkness," in that poetic figures might be extremely

---

<sup>10</sup>In her work, Les doctrines médiévales chez Donne (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), it is Mary Ramsay, that in similar fashion, traces Donne's theology to medieval scholasticism. She is not consistently accepted.

challenging, but condemned indecorous obscurity. Donne, therefore, though difficult because of his compressed figures that force the mind to interpretation, was nonetheless faithful to the poetic developments of the late Renaissance, both in theory and practice. It would not serve our purpose to explore the more involved arguments surrounding this question, but it is freely admitted that the whole matter of decorum is extremely valid and important, deserving of thoughtful respect and study.

On the other hand, it is also possible to see Donne as part of a literary movement that violated decorum. C. S. Lewis says that the Metaphysical "deliberately produced poetic shocks by coupling what was sacred, august, remote or inhuman with what was profane, hum-drum, familiar and social."<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that such writers were unaware of decorum. It may well be that this is precisely the point, that they were exploiting this awareness so that their work would be doubly effective. Modern art is no stranger to this device. But such writing is of necessity parasitic if it has to assume prior knowledge and taste before the newer expression finds validity. Any discordia concors presupposes other literature. It could not begin by itself.

---

<sup>11</sup>C. S. Lewis, English Literature in the 16th Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 540.

The very possibility of this discussion indicates that the decorum of Donne's imagery must remain an open question. Donne's imagery in preaching drinks less deeply of the metaphysical spirit than his poetry.

At worst, Donne is obtuse and darkened, at best, he is an innovator within the framework of reason and propriety. This innovative quality must not be underestimated. Donne was possessed of a technical originality. When he spoke in his poetry of a mistress, she is like a hemisphere or one arm of a pair of compasses, and her hair is a viceroy and her tears are coins or maps. Donne had a different concept of imagery from that of other poets. The purpose of an image in his poetry was to define an emotional experience by an intellectual parallel. This creates a unique demand on the imagination, for, as Joan Bennett observes, Donne's reader must be capable, not only of feeling and thinking at the same time, but even of simultaneously sharing an emotion and enjoying a joke.<sup>12</sup> Thus Donne's images must be followed logically, and they are discovered to fit the emotion illustrated. It may be that Donne's poetry proves that there is such a thing as intellectual imagery. Donne was more interested or seems so, in truth than in beauty, especially in any

---

<sup>12</sup>Joan Bennett, Four Metaphysical Poets (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p. 30

conventional garb.

In his excellent discussion of the problem of the decorum of Donne's images, Schleiner asks the question whether or not there were handbooks or other sources which might delineate the place of decorum that the preacher of the seventeenth century would consult. His conclusion is that nothing indicates this possibility. However, a close examination reveals that Donne seems well aware of the principle of decorum. This is first of all demonstrated in Donne's whole-hearted acceptance of Biblical imagery as the highest and finest available:

So they shall be musick in re, in their matter, in their doctrine; and they shall be also in modo, in their manner of presenting that doctrine. Religion is a serious thing, but not a sullen; Religious preaching is a grave exercise, but not a sordid, not a barbarous, not a negligent. There are not so eloquent books in the world, as the Scriptures; Accept those names of Tropes and Figures, which the Gramarians and Rhetoricians put upon us, and we may be bold to say, that in all their Authors, Greek and Latin, we cannot find so high, and so lively examples of those Tropes, and those Figures, as we may in the Scriptures: whatsoever hath justly delighted any man in any mans writings, is exceeded in the Scriptures. (II, 170-171)

Donne notes that for a while there were those who demeaned the style of scripture, but that the true quality was now apparent through improvement in language study:

So, howsoever the Christians at first were fain to sink a little under that imputation, that their Scriptures have no Majesty, no eloquence, because these embellishments could not appeare in Translations, nor they then read Originalls, yet now, that a perfect knowledge of those languages hath brought us to see the

beauty and the glory of those Books, we are able to reply to them, there are not in all the world so eloquent Books as the Scriptures; and that nothing is more demonstrable, then that if we would take all those Figures, and Tropes, which are collected out of secular Poets, and Orators, we may give higher, and livelier examples of every one of those Figures, out of the Scriptures, then out of all the Greek and Latine Poets, and Orators, and they mistake it much, that thinke, that the Holy Ghost hath rather chosen a low, and barbarous, and homely style, then an eloquent, and powerfull manner of expressing himselfe. (VI,56)

It should be noted that Donne uses the term "higher" to identify biblical tropes. The same expression is used in introducing the passage just quoted:

. . . let me note thus much . . . that the Holy Ghost in penning the Scriptures delights himself, not only with a propriety, but with a delicacy, and harmony, and melody of language; with height of Metaphors, and other figures, which may work greater impressions upon the Readers, and not with barbarous, or triviall, or market, or homely language. (VI,55)

Donne is also aware that there may be "low" metaphors, a rough distinction, to be sure. However, he does not find these in scripture, but in his own framing of scriptural truth. In a sermon to the King in 1626 he comes to the end of his hour and earnestly admonishes his congregation:

We need not call that a Fable, but a Parable, where we heare, That a Mother to still her froward childe told him, she would cast him to the Wolf, the Wolf should have him; and the Wolf which was at the door, and within hearing, waited, and hoped he should have the childe indeed; but the childe being still'd, and the Mother pleased, then she saith, so shall we kill the Wolf, the Wolf shall have none of my childe, and then the Wolf stole away. No metaphor, no comparison is too high, none too low, too triviall, to imprint in you a sense of Gods everlasting goodnesse towards you. God bids your Mother the Church, and us her

Servants for your Souls, to denounce his judgements upon your sinnes, and we do it; and the executioner Satan, beleeves us, before you beleeeve us, and is ready on his part. Be you also ready on your part to lay hold upon those conditions, which are annext to all Gods maledictions. (VII, 369)

No metaphor is too high or too low, Donne says, and it would seem that this homely story is a "low" one. Another example is from an undated sermon on Psalm 32:5:

It is but a homely metaphor, but it is a wholesome, and a usefull one, Confessio vomitus, Confession works as a vomit; It shakes the frame and it breakes the bed of sin and it is an ease to the spirituall stomach, to the conscience, to be thereby disburdened. It is an ease to the sinner, to the patient; but that that makes it absolutely is that it is a glory to God. (IX, 304)

It is proper to say that Donne recognizes the long-standing homiletic principle that style has to be raised and lowered appropriately. To speak of man may allow the figure of slime and worms. To speak of God is to speak of king, light, sun, etc. "Language must wait upon matter, and words upon things" (X, 112).

This principle can produce a wealth of figures that may be described with the quality of homeliness. The preacher who indulges in empty rhetoric

. . . having made a Pye of Plums, without meat, offers it to sake in every Market, and having made an Oration of Flowers, and Figures, and Phrases without strength, sings it over in every Pulpit. (VII, 329)

This homely beauty harnessed to penetrating ideas is in such a passage as this:

We should wonder to see a Mother in the midst of many sweet Children passing her time in making babies and puppets for her own delight. We should wonder to see a man, whose Chambers and Galleries were full of curious master-peece, thrust in a Village Fair to looke upon sixpenny pictures, and three farthing prints. We have all the Image of God at home, and we all make babies, fancies of honor, in our ambitions. The master-peece in countrey Fairs, . . . we endure the decay of fortune, of body, of soule, of honour, to possesse lower Pictures; pictures that are not originalls, not made by that hand of God, nature; but Artificiall beauties. And for that body, we give a soule, and for that drugge which might have been sought, where they bought it for a shilling, we give an estate. The Image of God is worth more then all substances; and we give it, for colours, for dreames, for shadowes. (IX, 80-81)

The following "low" metaphors are unkindly (I think) classified as grotesque or macabre by Mrs. Evelyn Simpson, the eminent authority on Donne and collaborator with George Potter in the sermon collection.<sup>13</sup> An elephant or a whale is not a "grotesque" figure because it is huge, nor a fly or flea because it is small. Nor is it macabre to take as a figure the location of the gallows near the city to picture our own death as an encouraging sign of a completed pilgrimage:

And this is brought neerer and neerer unto us, as we come neerer and neerer to our end. As he that travails weary, and late towards a great City, is glad when he comes to a place of execution, because he knows that he is neer the town; so when thou comest to the gate of death, be glad of that, for it is but one from that to thy Jerusalem. (II, 266)

---

<sup>13</sup> John Donne, The Sermons of John Donne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), I.

In the context of a culture that had its public hanging-spot, the figure is low but not macabre.

We are already facing the problem of getting at the poetic imagery of John Donne in any organized and understandable fashion. There are traditionally three main approaches to this task:

1. There may be an attempt to find a point of comparison, a common ground between tenor and vehicle through which to classify the metaphor. This has been highly subjective and unsatisfactory.
2. The most common approach has been through the collation of the vehicles. Thus, from the expression, "the leprosy of sin," the category of illness would be established, and all references to illness would be explored to determine how the writer used this figure. The most ambitious work of this type has been that of Milton Rugoff in his book, Donne's Imagery.<sup>14</sup> The table of contents is a guide to this technique.

Some of the subjects are: Medicine and Alchemy, Geometry and the Circle, Law Courts and Prisons, The Arts, Domestic Life, Sports and Games, Sea Travel and Exploration, Commerce and Coinage,

---

<sup>14</sup>The same type of work has been done on Shakespeare by Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery (New York: Macmillan, 1936).



King, State and War, The Heavens, Rivers and Seas, Animals, etc.

The problem with the use of the vehicles is not its collation, but the use made of the data. Almost invariably the assumption is made that since imagery is a wide-open possibility for a freely-ranging mind, the figures which become predominant begin to tell something about the author. Not only the figures used, but the figures not used may be considered important. The psychologizing possible is apparent, but it should be noted that this does not adequately take into account the figurative language traditionally attached to the tenors under consideration. More especially is this significant in the biblical tradition. There will be further occasion to see the importance of this principle for Donne's work.

3. The third method of classification is to consider the tenors, e.g., for the "leprosy of sin" to gather all figures used to depict sin. The problem here is one of heterogeneity, with a certain confusion of thought as the various figures are rather arbitrarily placed together.

William Mueller rather combines these approaches. He considers metaphors in these ways: Comparisons between religious and secular experiences, parts of the body (whether tenor or vehicle), sermons built around a central image, and various images as a class,

e.g., light and water.<sup>15</sup> The more felicitous approach appears to be the development of what Schleiner calls "fields of imagery," which allows consideration both of the image-supplying and the image-receiving elements of the trope.<sup>16</sup> This sets up a kind of basic analogy, and no matter what the particular terms might be, the trope is in that field if it opens out something properly involved in that basic analogy.

This seems a useful tool. Some fields are easily established, such as Sin as Sickness. This involves a whole range of metaphors, all rooted firmly in the scriptures. Jesus in his many acts of healing and in statements such as Matthew 9:12, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick," gives ample base for this field of imagery. The use of *σωτηρία* with its contingent meaning of health and wholeness is theological reinforcement. The fathers, especially Augustine, delight in this figure. It is, as would be expected, constantly in Donne. Our interest is the poetic way in which this figure is turned, honed, utilized for beauty and effectiveness. Consider a passage such as this, set appropriately enough in a

---

<sup>15</sup> William Mueller, *John Donne, Preacher* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 114-145.

<sup>16</sup> Harald Weinrich, "Munze und Wort: Untersuchungen an einem Bildfeld," in *Romanica: Festschrift für Gerhard Rohlfs* (Halle: n.p., 1958), pp. 508-521, quoted by Schleiner, pp. 67-68.

sermon on Jesus' cure of the palsied man in Matthew 9:2:

What ease were it, to be delivered of a palsie, of slack and dissolv'd sinews, and remaine under the tyranny of a lustfull heart, of licentious eyes, of slacke and dissolute speech and conversation? What ease to be delivered of the putrefaction of a wound in my body, and meet a murder in my conscience, done or intended, or desired upon my neighbour? To be delivered of a fever in my spirit and to have my spirit troubled with the guiltinesse of an adultery? To be delivered of Cramps, and Coliques, and Convulsions in my joynts and sinewes, and suffer in my soule all these, from my oppressions, and extortions, by which I have ground the face of the poore. It is but lost labour, and cost, to give a man a precious cordiall, when he hath a thorne in his foote, or an arrow in his flesh: for as long as the sinne, which is the cause of the sicknesse, remains, Deterius sequetur, A worse thing will follow: we may be rid of a Fever, and the Pestilence will follow, rid of the Cramp, and a Gout will follow, rid of sicknesse, and Death, eternall Death will follow. (X, 80)

The exploitation of the comparison is masterful, and the emotional impact of the last sentence, properly enunciated, is breath-taking.

Donne constantly speaks of grace and the gospel as being a physick, the common name of the time for any healing, restoring process, application or medicine. Again Donne's utilization of the biblical imagery is striking. Preaching on David's cry, "O Lord, heal me" (Psalm 6:2), Donne comments:

From the dangerous effects then of this sicknesse, David desires to be healed, and by God himselfe, Sana me Domine, O Lord heale me; for that physick that Man gives, is all but drugs of the earth; Moral and Civill counsailes, rather to cover then recover, rather to disguise then to avoid: They put a clove in the mouth, but they do not mend the lungs. To cover his nakednesse Adam tooke but fig-leaves; but to recover Ezechias, God tooke figs themselves. Man deales upon leaves, that cover, and shadow, God upon fruitfull and effectuall means that cure, and nourish.

And then, God tooke a lumpe of figs; God is liberall of his graces, and gives not over a cure, at one dressing; And they were dry figs too, sayes that story; you must not looke for figs from the Tree, for immediate Revelations, for private inspirations from God; but the medicinall preaching of the Word, medicinall Sacraments, medicinall Absolution, are such dry figs as God hath preserved in his Church for all our diseases. S. Paul had a strong desire, and he expressed it in often prayer to God, to have this peccant humour, this malignity cleane purged out, to have that Stimulus carnis, that concupiscence absolutely taken away. God would not do so; but yet he applied his effectuall physick, sufficient Grace. (V, 349)

The following paragraph in Donne's sermon just quoted continues in the same vein. He uses the figure of a plaster, sent by the Father, made by the Son, brought by the Holy Spirit, and laid on the patient by the Minister. In line with the metaphorical philosophy which Donne utilized, he gives this figure a primary existence rooted in the purpose of God for it to be a figure, rather than in its own function within nature: "God's purpose in giving us the science of bodily health, was not determined in the body; but his large and gracious purpose was, by that restitution of the body, to raise us to the consideration of spirituall health" (V, 350).

Another appropriate field of imagery employed with great skill by Donne is life as a journey. Again we are facing a whole range of metaphor with deep roots in the Bible. It seems to be a given that the time line is most appropriately figured in a space continuum, which has to be a journey with beginning, continuation and ending. Most often Donne uses the sea voyage, which he knew by

experience and which lends itself so well to helpful metaphor.<sup>17</sup>

There are many places to demonstrate Donne in this delightful trope. A sermon on the call of the disciples to be fishers of men provides well for extended analogy:

The world is a Sea in many respects and assimilations. It is a Sea, as it is subject to stormes, and tempests: Every man (and every man is a world) feels that. And then, it is never the shallower for the calmnesse, the Sea is as deepe, there is as much water in the Sea, in a calme, as in a storme; we may be drowned in a calme and flattering fortune, in prosperity, as irrecoverably, as in a wrought Sea, in adversity; So the world is a Sea. It is a Sea, as it is bottomlesse to any line, which we can sound it with, and endlesse to any discovery that we can make of it. The purposes of the world, the wayes of the world, exceed our consideration; But yet we are sure the Sea hath a bottome, and sure that it hath limits, that it cannot overpasse; The power of the greatest in the world, the life of the happiest in the world, cannot exceed those bounds, which God hath placed for them; So the world is a Sea. It is a Sea, as it hath ebbs and floods, and no man knowes the true reason of those floods and those ebbs. All men have changes and vicissitudes in their bodies (they fall sick), And in their estates (they grow poore), And in their minds (they become sad), at which changes (sicknesse, poverty, sadnesse), themselves wonder, and the cause is wrapped up in the purpose and judgement of God onely, and hid even from them that have them; and so the world is a Sea. It is a Sea, as the Sea affords water enough for all the world to drinke, but such water as will not quench the thirst. The world afford conveniences enow to satisfie Nature, but these encrease our thirst with drinking, and our desire growes and enlarges it selfe with our abundance, and though we sayle in a full Sea, yet we lack water; So the world is a Sea. (II, 306)

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Don Cameron Allen, "Donne and the Ship Metaphor," Modern Language Review, LXXVI (1961), 306-312.

The passage continues with a consideration of the inhabitants of the sea, its lack of habitations, and the ships that are in and out of the water in their sailing. Note the majestic sweep of the paragraph quoted, including its bell-like repetition of the phrase, "So the world is a Sea." The rhythm and poetic power of the spoken word would be most arresting. The sermon continues with a similar metaphorical description of the net, the gospel.

Tropes on life as a journey are everywhere in Donne, but in denoting an area of imagery we must point out again that no particular classification deals with all the data. Donne sees life as more than just a voyage. One study has been made of Donne's archetypal image of roundness, for instance, and such figures as a crown, egg, sphere, coin, and womb stress the importance for Donne of the circle as a representation of life.<sup>18</sup>

There are additional fields or areas of imagery under which Donne's skill in metaphor can be organized. Schleiner suggests several that prove facile. "The Book of the World" is an elaboration of some scriptural metaphors and a figure which falls very easily to the hand of the academician.<sup>19</sup> Again Donne seems to be thoroughly

---

<sup>18</sup>Mary Ellen Williams, "John Donne's Orbe of Man . . . Inexplicable Mystery" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan), 1964.

<sup>19</sup>E. R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (New York: Pantheon, 1953).

informed by the patristic and scriptural traditions. He uses the two-book figure to portray nature and scripture, hardly a new concept.

The "imprinting" of a book, a figure not found in the Bible, is approximated by the biblical use of the "seal." Schleiner suggests a field of imagery in which the seal of the sacrament is a basic analogy.<sup>20</sup> This is not difficult to follow. It is more complicated to try to show that the figure of baptism as a seal by analogy linked itself with the restoration of the "image" (stamp or seal) of God in man. It is too much to ask that the "image" of God is what is signified in baptism as a seal. Perhaps the vehicle of seal for the tenor, baptism, is almost too narrow for a "field" of imagery. It might well be included in Schleiner's subsequent classification of "salvation as purchase," which could be broadened for the covenant signs and symbols, so prominent in the scriptural analogies.

Part of the problem of examination of metaphor lies in the fact that some theological terms are directly correlated with secular ideas that yield a wide range of metaphor. Such is true for the whole biblical description of redemption, which has its roots in commercial

---

<sup>20</sup>The main theological source of this discussion is the work of G. W. H. Lampe, The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers (London: Mowbray, 1951).

transactions. This allows a wide range of application, especially to the poetic and imaginative mind. This is not so much an improper distance of metaphor as it is the creation of a new understanding out of the joining of two items which bear proper relationship to a field of imagery. Consider this passage from one of Donne's Divine Poems, "Wilt thou love God, as he thee!":

And as a robb'd man, which by search doth finde  
His stolne stuffe sold, must lose or buy't againe:  
The Sonne of glory came downe, and was slain,  
Us whom he had made, and Satan stolne, to unbinde.

The central biblical metaphor of salvation as purchase and the commercial connotations of redemption forbid regarding this metaphor as dissonant or profane.

The imagery of Donne is awesome in its scope. Analysis suffers in facing the breadth of the material. After all, some of our most basic vocabulary is metaphorical. This is especially true in representing the act of understanding in terms of visual perception. "I see" is a metaphor, but hardly creative as an indication of understanding. Under this field of imagery can be gathered discussions of the beatific vision, light, darkness, seeing in a mirror (*speculum*), insight, blindness and color. Schleiner also gathers some uses of theatrum mundi into this field of perception, although these incidences all occur within one sermon.<sup>21</sup> This field was so broadly biblical and

---

<sup>21</sup>Donne, *The Sermons*, VIII, 219-236, a sermon on I Cor. 13:12: "For now we see through a glass darkly."



so well-exploited by the Fathers that it is hard to show Donne as anything more than faithful to a tradition in its usage. Yet there are hidden away in this maze of words constant reminders of the poetic genius that created them.

Other fields of imagery that are not quite as inclusive in scope include life as warfare, the relation of God and man as marriage, and spiritual realities as goods. These are all primarily scriptural analogies. It is interesting to note that the preacher of the time had available to him extensive lists of metaphors and their usages through the Christian era. One such volume was Robert Cawdrey's, A Treasure or Store-House of Similies: Both Pleasant and Delightfull, and Profitable, for All Estates of Men in General. This volume is not listed in Keynes, Bibliography of Donne's library, and no direct evidence has been cited that Donne used this or any similar work. Yet the body of metaphorical tradition was not only in existence but in a rather sophisticated fashion.

In a sermon preached at St. Paul's on Christmas, 1622, Donne began: "The whole journey of a Christian is in these words; and therefore we were better set out early, than ride too fast" (IV, 25). Once he establishes this basic metaphor, many ordinary and otherwise lifeless words take life from the metaphor and give sustaining life back to it. Here is a partial list of such words that appear subsequently in this sermon:

advance	feet	perverted	transgress
ascend	find	proceed	transported
borderers	go	progress	tread
bring	got up	pursue	turn
carry	journey	run	voyage
comes	let you in	return	walk
contiguous	meet	sail	way
course	navigate	step	
descend	pace	strayed	
farther	path	towards	

Hundreds upon hundreds of such words, interspersed with scores of explicit restatements of the metaphor lace Donne's sermons with color and life.

Before concluding observations on the imagery of Donne, we should notice that we are dealing with material that demands respect for its creative flair. Dr. Johnson is reported to have asked, "Who would have thought that a good man is a telescope?"<sup>22</sup> Donne also compared a good man to an engraving. He is preaching at the "end of his hour-glass":

There is not a minute left to do it; not a minutes sand; Is there a minutes patience? Bee pleased to remember that those Pictures which are deliver'd in a minute, from a print upon a paper, had many dayes, weeks, Moneths time for the graving of those Pictures in the Copper; So this Picture of that dying Man, that dies in Christ, that dies the death of the Righteous, that embraces Death as a Sleepe, was graving all his life: All his publique actions were the lights, and all his private the shadowes of this Picture. And when this Picture comes to the Presse, this Man to the streights and agonies of Death, thus he lies, thus he looks, this he is. (VIII, 190)

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., I, 96.

From beginning to end of the preaching that we have in print, Donne was spinning his images. There was perhaps a greater unity in the extended metaphor in the later sermons, but never a lack of images, early or late. To read Donne is to be bathed in metaphor. All of this makes it difficult to understand how any author could possibly comment, as J. B. Leishman has, that there are very few metaphors, images, or illustrations in Donne.<sup>23</sup>

### Other Poetic Elements

There are other literary qualities that can only be described as poetic, and Donne is not lacking here. One is an intuitive sense of rhythm. Nothing short of reading of the prose itself can be convincing in this, but the student of Donne almost takes this for granted.<sup>24</sup>

It is interesting to speculate about the influence of Hebrew poetry on the prose style of Donne. There is a constant use of antithesis and parallelism, the balancing of ideas, that gives to prose the true poetic order without the arbitrary use of meter or strophe. Consider this example:

---

<sup>23</sup>J. B. Leishman, The Metaphysical Poets (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), p. 21.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Mueller, pp. 105-109.

If some King of the earth have so large an extent of Dominion, in North, and South, as that he hath Winter and Summer together in his Dominions, so large an extent East and West, as that he hath day and night together in his Dominions, much more hath God mercy and judgement together: He brought light out of darknesse, not out of a lesser light: he can bring thy Summer out of Winter, though thou have no Spring: though in the wayes of fortune, or understanding, or conscience, thou have been benighted till now, wintred and frozen, clouded and eclipsed, damped and denummed, smothered and stupified till now, now God comes to thee, not as in the dawning of the day, not as in the bud of the spring, but as the Sun at noon to illustrate all shadowes, as the sheaves in harvest, to fill all penuries; all occasions invite his mercies, and all times are his seasons. (VI, 172)

There is here a most amazing balance, contrast, a cadence that is musical. It cannot be torn at any point without losing its life. Part of Donne's training for this was undoubtedly his instruction in Latin prose, the firm command of the long line, the control of the subordinate clauses.

The same ingenuity that Donne always shows in his use of imagery is present in his development of thought. I am completely intrigued by this rather famous passage in which Donne confesses his problem with prayer:

But when we consider with a religious seriousnesse the manifold weaknesses of the strongest devotions in time of Prayer, it is a sad consideration. I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his Angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore: I talke on, in the same posture of praying: Eyes lifted up; knees bowed downe; as though I prayed to God; and if God, or his Angels should aske me, when I thought last of God in that prayer, I cannot tell: Sometimes I finde that I had forgot what

I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of tomorrows dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer. So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spirituall things, perfect in this world. (VII, 264-265)

Another way of describing this literary power is to note Donne's use of runs, a kind of piling on of figures or slightly varied repetitions that are almost hypnotic. This rhythm device has led T. S. Eliot to suggest that Donne belongs in the same category as Billy Sunday.<sup>25</sup> There is justification for this if it is meant that Donne plays upon the emotions of his audience. Yet there is an ingredient that prevents this from being manipulative. Donne probably thinks as much or more of himself as an instrument to be played upon as he does of his congregation. The factor that is highly important in this discussion that is unavailable to us in his voice and delivery. Even material that seems highly personal in content can be successfully depersonalized by extremes in style of delivery. Our assumption must be for Donne that he did not allow his style in presentation to suggest that he himself was not involved in its meaning.

We have said that metaphysical wit seemed to prepare and advance John Donne in his preaching task. In the course of one hundred and sixty sermons there are many turns of thought,

---

<sup>25</sup>Eliot, p. 292.

metaphors, subtleties of idea that can be formally traced back to similar structures in Donne's poetry. Some of this must be considered analogical, and there is no evidence that Donne made any conscious effort to "bring" his poetry into his preaching. There might be reason to believe the very opposite, since Donne often expressed regret over his early life. Yet Donne was enough of an artist to know the value of his poetic work, which he carefully preserved, and to consciously and unconsciously resort to the mental and emotional channels that served him so well as a poet.

It is difficult to compare the sermons and the poetry, at least it is if one lets the sermon be a literary unit. Donne's sermons were lengthy, and the sheer bulk of his writing makes comparison with a poem of a few lines a problem. However, it is possible to identify some of the major characteristics of Donne's poetry and see just how these appear in a sermon. From many possible choices I have selected one of Donne's finest sermons, the second of his Prebend Sermons on his five Psalms, preached at St. Paul's on January 29, 1625. As one of the thirty Prebends of the Cathedral chapter, Donne was appointed to read and meditate daily upon five Psalms, his being 62-66. It also was his responsibility to preach on these, and he did so with great delight and with unusual warmth and skill. The second is on the text, Psalm 63:7: "Because thou hast

been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice." It is one long hymn of joy, and this demand for grateful rejoicing arouses the suspicion of a more than casual pastoral concern. Such indeed proves to be the case, for Donne preaches this sermon at the end of the dreadful epidemic of bubonic plague that struck London in the summer and fall of 1625. This was not the first sermon that he gave after the plague. There are no specific references to the plague in this Prebend sermon, yet Donne is far more sensitive to his time and his parishioners than to omit reference to such a tragic event. Nineteen thousand people had died in August alone, and Donne had joined thousands in fleeing the city. No family was untouched, or so it seemed. The King, the Court, and Parliament had all fled to the country after a day of fasting, during which King and Lords heard two sermons and the House of Commons heard three, one of three hours and the others two hours duration, --surely an act of penance.

In the sermon Donne is alive with figures, especially Biblical figures. "The Psalmes are the Manna of the Church," is his bright and enticing opening sentence. Donne favored the startling beginning, especially in his poetry. It is not consistent, but it is frequent. Examples are abundant: "For Godsake hold your tongue and let me love," "Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day," "Goe and catche a falling starre," "When I dyed last, and Deare, I dye,"

"Marke but this Flea," "Where, like a pillow on a bed," "Whoever comes to shroud me," "For the first twenty yeares, since yesterday."

This "Manna" gives every man what he likes best, instruction and satisfaction, and this in every emergency and occasion. He uses metaphor to place the Psalms in the life-worlds of his listeners. The relevance and dynamism of the text is presented under figures of ointment, or "Searchcloth," to heal and relieve the bruises of life. He is even conscious of a typical poetic compression by arguing that all the Psalms are in this Psalm and all this Psalm is in this verse. Then he can claim for this verse "the whole compasse of Time, Past, Present and Future; and these three parts of Time, shall be at this time, the three parts of this Exercise" (11.35-37).

Donne finds the "present" for David in the introduction of the Psalm that indicates the time of utterance. It is a time of distress. David is in the wilderness of Judah. The past is in the phrase, "Because thou hast been my help," and the future, "Therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoyce." Donne sees this all under another familiar figure:<sup>26</sup> "Fixe upon God any where and you shall find him a Circle; He is with you now. . . . He was with you before . . . and he will be with you hereafter" (11.46-49).

---

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Rugoff, pp. 64-73.



Donne then turns to the figure of weight to discuss the present affliction of the Psalmist. There is a "Pondus gloriae," a weight of glory promised by Paul that counterweighs all present affliction. Nothing else would do it. Donne then lists an impressive array of "burdens" ranging from the fly of the pestilence of Egypt to the hair of Absalom. "All our life is a continuall burden, yet we must not groane; a continuall squeasing, yet we must not pant" (11.113-114). This comparison of temporal and spiritual afflictions is reminiscent of his earlier preaching when he returned from serving as Doncaster's chaplain prior to the beginning of the Thirty Years' War (III, No. 1). Donne presses his text and context with the same ingenuity and excitement so characteristic of the poetry: David longs for the altars of the Lord during his sojourn in the desert. This circumstance merges with application; the benefits of public worship serve to emphasize the gravity of any kind of exclusion, whether excommunication by the church or voluntary absence by the parishioner.

In the second part there is interesting evidence of Donne's tendency to objectify the words of a text. "Because thou hast been" becomes an "idea," and a "pattern" or "example"; "my help" is construed as "my helper." Again Donne's use of typology, the direct application to life of matters seen under the figures of the text

becomes apparent. God's prophecies became histories in the development of the two Testaments. Thus the histories of the Bible become prophecies of what God will do for the faithful in the present, a typical Augustinian reflection. The development of his idea is subtle and creative: All men would agree and God's work teaches us that a previously thought-out pattern for action is always needed. The pattern for us must be the ways in which God has already acted. (Donne uses this principle to pillory the Puritan extemporaneous prayers and sermons.) The way that God acted for David and can act for us is to be our Help.

The last part of the sermon is an exploration of David's hope and expectation. He will rejoice under God's wings. Here Donne moves with authority and radiance to lift the spirits of his congregation. He reviews the power of God indicated by his names and metaphors in the Bible: Sword, Target, Wall, Tower, Rock, Hill, and all of these together, The Lord of Hosts (11.512-515). God has no defensive armor, but God himself becomes our armor. With real pastoral concern Donne concedes to the pain of the recent attack of the plague by pointing out that the Wings provide refreshing but not immunity. He traces the power denoted by the figure of Wings. It is the picture in the Bible of the ships of a great nation, the deliverance of God for Israel from Egypt, the power of God to defeat enemies and

protect his own.

The close is a great attempt to bring comfort and renewed joy. "Raise your hearts, and dilate your hearts to a holy joy, to a joy in the Holy Ghost" (ll. 634-635). He then performs a dazzling sequence of images which expand and soar before the soul. He returns again to the use of a map, this time in two hemispheres. The joy and glory of Heaven are its Eastern and Western halves. The new world of America is the glory of heaven that is long withheld from man's knowledge. Yet the old world given for his habitation is the joy of heaven that is available for present experience. As there are two deaths, so there are two lives: the joy of present life in God and the glory of life eternal.

Donne remembers that the Holy Spirit is a dove with wings that broods upon the waters and brings forth order and all that is good. He calls on his hearers to be mothers for the brooding Spirit and conceive and produce the joy that God wants for them. The joy of heaven begins now and flows into the greater joy as the river into the sea. In fact, heaven is here, says Donne:

But as my soule, as soone as it is out of my body, is in Heaven, and does not stay for the possession of Heaven, nor for the fruition of the sight of God, till it be ascended through ayre, and fire, and Moone, and Sun, and Planets, and Firmament, to that place which we conceive to be Heaven, but without the thousandth part of a minutes stop, as soone as it issues, is in a glorious light, which is Heaven (for all the way to Heaven is Heaven; And as those Angels, which came from Heaven hither, bring Heaven with them, and are in Heaven here, So that soule

that goes to Heaven, meets Heaven here; and as those Angels  
do not devest Heaven by comming, so these soules invest  
Heaven, in their going.) As my soule shall not goe towards  
Heaven, but goe by Heaven to Heaven, to the Heaven of Heavens,  
So the true joy of a good soule in this world is the very joy of  
Heaven. (11.724-736)

The passage is reminiscent of the earlier statement of the trans-  
lation of the soul in Donne's "Second Anniversary."

There is one predominant comparison that becomes obvious  
when one goes from poem to sermon. Consider the progress of  
thought in a poem like "The Flea." The persona of the poem sees a  
marvelous allegory and a cue for action in the flea that has bitten  
him and his love, and is now crushed under her fingernail. It is the  
height of cleverness, and from a most unexpected, seemingly  
inappropriate source. The speaker reasons away under the figure of  
this metaphor on something that the heart feels and knows already.  
He and his love are joined in that bug, so why not in reality? It did  
not hurt the bug or anyone else, nor are those who lost the blood the  
weaker. So her fears are groundless, her honor will no more depart  
in her submission to him than her life did in the flea.

The key is cleverness, a kind of inventiveness which should  
probably be distinguished from creativity, though the distinction is a  
fine one. Yet once Donne takes the figure, the metaphysical  
"conceit," he immediately, like some juggler, puts a great many  
balls in the air, and fascinates and intrigues us with his dexterity.

Every once in a while it is obvious that he has dropped one, but he keeps moving and pretends to have done it on purpose.

This kind of inventiveness has a ready field of endeavor in preaching. Donne ranged over every conceivable terrain in his poetry, some of it in coarse, even hostile fashion. This road is hardly open to him as a minister, but in contrast, he has a given, a body of material from which and to which he now must speak. He favors the material in metaphor, but the text that is propositional still has "setting" or other qualities that open the door to metaphysical possibility. So in our Prebend sermon, the time of writing becomes both spatially and temporally instructive. The wings of consolation are deliberately held up high enough so that troubles can penetrate underneath, and the congregation is asked to allow "impregnation" by the Holy Ghost in order to bring forth joy. There is a complete change of climate from the poetry because of the profound differences of subject and purpose, but there is the same inventive turn of mind.

Many opinions could be cited to confirm Donne's great poetic gifts as evidenced in his preaching. There can be little disagreement with this evaluation:

We cannot read Donne's sermons aright without realizing that this preacher was essentially a poet, who when he was debarred from the ordinary forms of verse threw his energy into weaving new rhythms and harmonies in prose. . . . He could

not express the truth of himself save in poetry, or in a rhythmical prose which had all the essentials of poetry.<sup>27</sup>

Mrs. Simpson has beautifully illustrated her thesis by placing a portion of one of the more poetic sermons in such fashion as to make the structure clear:<sup>28</sup>

They shall awake as Jacob did,  
     and say as Jacob said,  
 Surely the Lord is in this place,  
     and this is no other but the house of God  
     and the gate of heaven,  
 And into that gate they shall enter,  
     And in that house they shall dwell,  
 Where there shall be no Cloud nor Sun,  
     no darknesse nor dazling,  
     but one equall light,  
 no noyse nor silence,  
     but one equall musick,  
 no fears or hopes  
     but one equall possession,  
 no foes nor friends,  
     but one equall communion and Identity,  
 no ends nor beginnings,  
     but one equall eternity.  
 Keepe us Lord so awake in the duties of our Callings,  
     that we may thus sleep in thy Peace, and wake in thy Glory.

#### Synthesis of Metaphysical Poetry and Anglican Preaching

To conclude the discussion of the poetry and preaching of John Donne it seems appropriate to indicate the beneficial results of

---

<sup>27</sup> Donne, The Sermon, I, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., VIII, 190.

the pouring into the Anglican skin of preaching the new wine of metaphysical poetry. We have broadly outlined the Augustinian concept of Scripture and Sermon in the discussion of Donne's use of the Bible. This needs to be sharpened as it relates to the entire preaching ministry of Donne.

There were some conflicting opinions about the nature of scripture and sermon that were becoming more vociferous at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Especially from the Puritans came the call for a renunciation of human art and learning in the exposition of God's word. The practice of extemporaneous preaching was spreading, claiming apostolic precedent. This was ex tempore in the fullest sense, rejecting the use of notes or prior memorization.

This concept was not without an Augustinian rebuttal. In his fourth book of De Doctrina Christina the great Doctor addresses this problem and concludes that the scripture has given the mind of God with a wholesome conjoining of wisdom and eloquence. Indeed, language itself is a reflection of mental and spiritual reality, and in this fact is the mandate for the finest use of language that is capable of manifesting the thought and intention of the divine author of the scriptures. The question is not thus simply one of rhetoric as to the use of adorned or unadorned phrases, high, moderate or low styles

of imagery. The question is how best the divine purpose, realized in all life and language, can be utilized to communicate the divine mind.

This really takes the dimension of a world-view, not just a theory of sacred discourse. The physical universe becomes in every aspect evidence of the existence, power, wisdom and goodness of the Creator. Yet far more effective in conveying the knowledge of God is the divine self-revelation in the scriptures, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. This progression is also seen in the scriptures themselves--from the Law and the Prophets to the Gospel and the Incarnation. Thus every work, object and event, rightly seen and understood, symbolizes and conveys the greatness and goodness of God.

Donne held to this traditional symbolic view of reality and its reflection in language with intensity and imagination. He brought a vitality of expression that was unique in his time and perpetuated the grand manner of the Fathers in expounding God's word. He followed with diligence, along with Andrewes, the example of Tertullian in using antithesis, paradox, and play on words to convey the mystery of the Christian faith. Donne on occasion would preach two sermons, one in the morning and the second in the evening, or on subsequent Sundays, on two texts that seemed to say opposite things.



Thus on January 30, 1620, he preached first on John 5:22, "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgement to the Son," and in the evening on John 8:15: "I judge no man." He also preached often on the same text with different approaches and applications. There are two sermons on Gen. 1:26; two on Psalm 6:4-5; two on Psalm 34:11; three on Psalm 38:4; two on Ezekiel 34:19; two on Micah 2:10; two on Matt. 4:18-20; two on Matt. 18:7; three on John 1:8; two on John 14:26; two on John 16:8-11; three on I Cor. 15:29; two on I Tim. 1:15. Yet the kind of structure that is most significant in this discussion is not the general selection of text and theme as much as it is the clever interplay of words and ideas within the sermon itself. Donne was a master at combining the inferred intent of the text with the movement of his own mind and imagination in penetrating its meaning. He was committed to the idea that the memory was the key to the soul and that access to the memory was through images. These were primarily the images of the scripture, but they also derived from all of life and thought, so that with an amazing kinetic force and evocative power Donne appealed directly to the conscience of his hearer. He was convinced that this was the means by which the Holy Spirit made his appeal to man, and this was evidenced to Donne by the language of scripture and the means of divine revelation in the world.

It should be obvious how this approach to the task of proclamation is enhanced by the poetic discipline of the metaphysical school. This was the group that found so much delight in pressing existence into the kinds of forms that etch themselves deeply into the reason and in their own way call upon the emotions.

There is no way in which the true balance of power can be determined in analyzing the effectiveness of Donne's preaching, and this is probably appropriate. What is the work of the Holy Spirit, and what is the power of Donne's genius? The history of the Church has been laced by amazingly diverse forms of spiritual ministry. This is rather patent in view of the diverse forms of human existence, and its corresponding capacity to receive, reflect, understand and act. Yet there always seems to be a certain hierarchy of systems, and some seem to stand closer to a coherent understanding of Christ and the true intent and content of the divine self-revelation. If there was ever an occasion of obedient language, replete with that kind of color and richness that identifies the human spirit in its most artistic and universal expressions, that occasion was in the preaching of John Donne.

The underlying principle of his preaching that usually saves him from pedantry or pompousness is his determination to apply his ideas to his congregation. There is perhaps no body of Christian

literature that is more appropriately called tropological than Donne's. This term, as we have noted, came to refer to the interpretation of scripture that is moral or ethical. Yet it is by etymology linked with discourse that is figurative. This was the way Donne approached figures, and by his world-view and understanding of scripture, this was the way in which truth had to be presented to the waiting listener.

## CHAPTER IV

### MYSTICISM IN DONNE'S PREACHING

My original impressions of Donne came, as it does to most, from reading his poetry. The boldness and subtlety of his thought was most impressive, and when I read more, especially of his religious poetry, I was convinced of his depth of religious feeling. He seemed to touch such poignant and profound chords of human experience that I easily anticipated his preaching and religious experience to be inevitably mystical.

Perhaps the problem is already indicated in the rather indefinite way in which mysticism is regarded. There is a stream of tradition that roots itself in Plotinus and the neo-Platonists. Although Augustine retrieved the major Christian dogmas of creation, Incarnation and resurrection from the neo-Platonists, yet the influence of this mode of thought can be felt, not only in some aspects of these dogmas, but also very strongly in the more peripheral teachings. The view of the universe as proceeding from God and returning to him, the exaltation of the spiritual as the only real world, a path of purification, self-discipline and asceticism as essential for the vision of God, all this is neo-Platonic but supposedly

congenial to Christian teaching. John Scotus Erigena translated pseudo-Dionysius from Greek into Latin and opened a kind of scholastic mysticism to the medieval Church. Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of St. Victor and St. Bonaventura carried the mystical tradition forward in the twelfth and thirteenth century. In Germany and the Netherlands the line went forward in Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, John Tauler, Jakob Boehme and Henry Ruysbroeck. Richard Rolle, Walter Hylton, Julian of Norwich, and the author of the Cloud of Unknowing were the major English mystics.

These and others, along with the body of literature that they produced, established a very clear pattern of the stages of mystical life. These are generally identified as conversion, purgation, illumination, and union. Can this process be identified in Donne? No less an authority than Evelyn M. Simpson feels that it can be.<sup>1</sup> She is quick to admit that his mysticism cannot be isolated from the rest of his thought, yet this thought partakes of a Christian mysticism characteristic of medieval scholastics. Miss M. P. Ramsay has attempted to settle the question of Donne as a medievalist in his philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is one thing to share theological roots with the

---

<sup>1</sup>Evelyn M. Simpson, A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Mary Paton Ramsay, Les Doctrines Médiévales Chez Donne (London: Oxford University Press, 1924).

mystics and another thing to be a mystic.

It is not enough to suggest that the unitive intensity of Donne makes him a mystic. Donne does bring together God and his universe, man and woman, the body and the soul. But in this unity he stands rather opposed to the Christian mystic and the neo-Platonist. The mystic presses toward absorption into the Deity, more and more either renouncing and leaving the flesh, or through its mortification and suffering arriving at new heights of spiritual apprehension. Donne consistently refused the dichotomy of soul and body, not subsuming the physical into the spiritual, but transforming the physical by the spiritual into a new incarnational reality.

Simpson also suggests that there is a straight-line relationship between the temperament of the mystic and the "conceited" metaphysical style.<sup>3</sup> It is true that the mystic is forced to speak in symbols, since mystical awareness is a spiritual apprehension that is inaccessible to the understanding as such. Yet the parallel should not be pressed, for the metaphysical poet found his "mystical" experience precisely within the "conceit." As we have observed from Eliot, the metaphysical poet discovered in his figures an honest merger of thought and feeling.

This is not to minimize the mystical elements in the

---

<sup>3</sup>Simpson, p. 100.

preaching of Donne. It is probably a matter of degree. Donne does accept the fact that faith and love are more than intellect. Love for God requires all the powers of the mind, but it is never bounded by the mind. "Love presumes knowledge," Donne remarks, "for, Amari nisi nota non possunt (Augustine), we can love nothing but that which we do, or think we do understand." "Knowledge cannot save us, but we cannot be saved without knowledge; Faith is not on this side of Knowledge, but beyond it; we must necessarily come to Knowledge first, though we must not stay at it, when we are come thither" (IX, 128). But this is a mysticism that is miles removed from a Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross. It is no favor to theological or historical preciseness to say, as Evelyn Simpson does, ". . . there is a school of religious thought which can rightly be called mystical, and to this Donne belongs."<sup>4</sup>

It is not enough to find in Donne the same set of metaphors that mystics use to describe their experiences. The love of man and wife as a symbol of the highest expression of the mystical union of the soul with God is a biblical metaphor and has been used by every preacher who ever took a text from Ephesians. This is a mysticism that is appropriate to all Christian theology, so this is hardly a distinctive of mysticism. Again, it is a matter of degree.

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

The genuine mystic so gives himself to this inner and spiritual search that he can feel that "the long-sought correspondence with transcendental Reality, his union with God, has now been finally established."<sup>5</sup> Donne had a proper regard for our ultimate union with God, but never in a present experience that approximates that eventual reality. It is equally specious to find Donne part of a particular mystic tradition because he emphasizes the person of Christ as the object of Christian devotion rather than God himself. This is the attempt of Husain:

It is thus clear that Donne belongs to that line of Christian mystics who, like St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa, and others, have made the adoration of Christ and the contemplation of His Passion the aim of their mystical life, while St. Thomas belongs to the school of Dionysius, the Areopagite, who while recognizing the significance of Christ makes God Himself the central object of the mystic's life.<sup>6</sup>

Donne never gave evidence of any asceticism, nearly always present in the life of the mystic. He also shows no penchant for a deeply contemplative life, and comments often that the finest devotions are available in the services of the Church, a thought most foreign to a true mystic.

---

<sup>5</sup>Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism (London: Methuen, 1911), p. 499.

<sup>6</sup>Itrat Husain, Mystical Elements in the Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1948), p. 105.



There is one event in Donne's life that approaches an ecstasy. In 1611 Donne had gone with Sir Robert Drury to France. He had left his wife and children with his wife's younger sister on the Isle of Wight. Ann was pregnant at the time and had raised some objection to his departure. Donne had received no news of the birth of his child. Walton records the interesting history of Donne's vision of her, carrying a dead child in her arms. A messenger was supposedly sent to ascertain news and returned twelve days later to report that Mrs. Donne had been delivered of a still-born child on the same day and hour of Donne's vision. The incident is not mentioned by Donne in any of his letters, and even if it is true, it is not characteristic of Donne's later experiences as a minister.

I will therefore dismiss the matter with the observation that the mysticism of John Donne is of the kind that is common to religion per se, and especially to Christianity. In that the Christian regards faith as the gift of God not obtained by the intellect or rational powers, and he accepts the Pauline affirmation that the believer is a person "in Christ," and he seeks by prayer and contemplation to conform to a Christ-like pattern, and he regards with significance the beatific vision as the ultimate bliss of heaven, a Christian is a mystic. John Donne thus qualifies.

## CHAPTER V

### DONNE AND CONTEMPORARY PREACHING

It is appropriate to ask what the relationship of Donne as a preacher is to the task of contemporary preaching. Is there any sense in which the study of Donne and his preaching technique informs the preacher today?

To ask the question is almost to answer it. The interest in Donne's preaching that has brought about the collection of his sermons and the expansion of his biography does arise in great part from the literary community. The poetry of Donne that placed him firmly in the mainstream of literary genius almost demanded that the world of literary criticism look significantly at his prose. Yet there continues to be interest in the religious community as well, and that is our primary concern.

The people who write books on preaching or who gather collections of sermons are obviously committed to preaching as a valid means of communicating the grace of God. Therefore we might expect to find some of the homiletics of Donne reflected in our century. Yet something must have taken place that would change the dimension of preaching, so both comparisons and contrasts would seem to be in order.

## Biblical Content

There are two major areas that emerge as significant when this task is undertaken and I will take them in order. The first is the subject of preaching and biblical content. It has not been difficult to trace in Donne a solid adherence to a tradition of biblical, textual preaching. We have clearly demonstrated that Donne forcefully applied his best understanding of a text to the ethical instruction and theological enlightenment of his congregation. His major resource for this was the writings of the Fathers and the medieval exegetes.

The contemporary scene has many resources for this discussion. I have chosen three as representative. Two are rather traditional, yet they are recognized technicians of skill and insight: Paul Scherer and George Buttrick. To open up a different use of biblical content in preaching I will turn to David Randolph.

The definitive work for both Scherer and Buttrick was their Beecher lecture. Buttrick's is entitled, Jesus Came Preaching, And Scherer's, For We Have This Treasure. Both men plead for biblical preaching:

May I stress the fact that preaching of whatever type must of necessity, to be true preaching articulate itself ultimately in Christian doctrine? Fundamentally every sermon must rely for its strength and carrying power on the accuracy and force with

which it presents, portrays and interprets the great, central facts of the Christian religion.<sup>1</sup>

This appeal for Christian doctrine is further explicated by Scherer as an appeal for expository preaching: "A sermon without exposition, with nothing which leads to a clearer understanding of the Christian faith, is without foundation. A sermon without the ethical is pointless."<sup>2</sup> Only in this way can the true objective of preaching, according to Scherer, be accomplished: a presentation of God and his greatness, the tragic estate of the human soul, and the Gospel.<sup>3</sup> When one reads Scherer, however, the impression is received that his passion centers upon the relative complacency and insipidity that even biblical preaching often mirrors. He wants the full impact of the disturbance of the gospel to burst upon the hearer. The danger, for Scherer, is to lose the trumpet sound of the gospel.

A similar position on biblical preaching is espoused by Buttrick. He does sound as though he yields a bit on the matter of textual preaching. His exemplar for this is Jesus, and Buttrick points out that Jesus does not use the Old Testament as a basis for

---

<sup>1</sup>Paul Scherer, For We Have This Treasure (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 106ff. See also Paul Scherer, The Word God Sent (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

his sermons, at least not all of them. This is certainly true. Jesus does begin with events, circumstances at hand, stories of his own devising. Buttrick does not comment on the idea of Jesus as the author of scripture rather than its expositor, and it is a truism that someone had to pen scripture de novo or there wouldn't be any. To what extent our preaching duplicates the insight and authority of Jesus is another problem. However, Buttrick does observe that Jesus is himself our gospel, and he is portrayed in the Bible. There does not seem to be a restriction of material if the Bible is used as the source for preaching.<sup>4</sup>

Buttrick finds great relief in the combination in the Bible of progress and culmination. The principle of progress frees him from the need of a dogma of infallibility. The principle of culmination means that the New Testament is "more than a light to our path: it is life to our souls." He unshamedly confesses to a commitment to expository preaching, with the proviso that genuine expository preaching always carries the Bible to life. Even if we begin with life, the demand is still there to end with the Bible, since the Bible so adequately and accurately reads everyman.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>George A. Buttrick, Jesus Came Preaching (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 146.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

Perhaps this is all quite successfully summarized in Buttrick's concluding chapter, "The Preaching of the Cross." He comments: "Apostolic preaching had but one word--Christ. Apostolic preaching linked to that Word one overmastering adjective: 'Christ Crucified.'" <sup>6</sup> There follows a deeply-moving, masterfully-expressed appeal for a continuation or return to kerygmatic preaching, though without the elaborate scholastic or theological explanations that often characterized Donne. Buttrick is satisfied with the proclamation of the Cross, leaving the mystery of forgiving love veiled in the event. Yet this is all within the spirit and practice of biblical preaching as Donne advocated and practiced it.

The most significant contemporary variation affecting the use of the Bible in preaching is well represented by David Randolph. He calls his book, The Renewal of Preaching, "A New Homiletic based on the New Hermeneutic." It is not within our purview to explore all the implications of this work, but there is a basic difference in his approach to preaching that is relevant.

Randolph is strongly influenced by Carl Michalson. <sup>7</sup> The

---

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>7</sup>Carl Michalson, The Hinge of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959); Carl Michalson, The Rationality of Faith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

thesis is that theology must be viewed as history, and that the most faithful unfolding of the kerygma is in terms of existence. The debt of this to existentialism is obvious. It is only as life is filled with meaning that man becomes free, intelligent and responsible, and that Christianity genuinely comes into being. The presence of Jesus of Nazareth in history makes this experience available, although it would be possible for a man to discover this for himself. Yet in Christ, God was turning the world over to man, and man can understand the nature of this life as he looks at and hears the message of Jesus of Nazareth. A Christian is one who knows the fruits of the spirit, not intellectual data. These fruits are historically lived out, and preaching is the invitation to authentication by existence of the biblical text. It is "not the packaging of a product, but the evocation of an event."<sup>8</sup> What Randolph takes away with one hand, he seems to give back with another, for the nature of the event does seem to be defined by the biblical history, though by what canon is not readily discernible. However, the actual use of the Bible in preaching is not a serious consideration for Randolph, since the question of preaching integrity must be described in terms of results historically realized.

---

<sup>8</sup>David James Randolph, The Renewal of Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 73.

"The sermon should not be on a text but from a text."<sup>9</sup> Ebeling, from whom Randolph also draws heavily, says that the sermon is not to be an exposition of the text, but an execution of the text.<sup>10</sup>

Yet when Randolph gets to the matter of sermon construction, he takes a text most seriously and even defines the sermon as the communicative word (meaning, clear?) with, from, and through the biblical text.<sup>11</sup> With the qualification already made that only the convinced write books about sermons, it is still appropriate to see John Donne's approach to biblical preaching very much alive. The remark is equally true of Donne's contemporaries, to be sure, but this does not invalidate it for the good Dean of St. Paul's.

### Metaphorical Expression

The second area of Donne's preaching which I propose to explore in contemporary thought is the use of metaphor. Donne's work as a metaphysical poet gave him great preparation for the use of unusual and extremely helpful figures in his preaching, as we have observed. How is this approach regarded today?

The question opens a veritable Pandora's box, since one

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>10</sup>Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 331.

<sup>11</sup>Randolph, p. 105.



of the major concerns of the theological community now is the whole matter of religious language. There are really two questions that need to be carefully separated, that unfortunately overlap. The first is philosophical, the second is functional. The first asks how language can appropriately or discretely communicate anything at all about God. The second asks how the preacher best explicates the moral abstractions and theological principles that derive from scripture.

John Donne probably never gave a second thought as to whether or not it was appropriate to talk about God. He did talk in complete accord with the principle of analogy. The use of likenesses or similes was early seized upon in religious talk so as to stretch everyday language in such a way that it would embrace the divine, at least in some manner. This way of talking eventually developed into a full-blown doctrine of analogy, much-discussed and elaborated in the Middle Ages. Its major components were the via negationis and the via eminentiae. Both of these contrast the infinite with the finite. Negationis simply denies the infinite all characteristics of the finite. Eminentiae claims that every positive characteristic of the finite bears some affinity to a corresponding characteristic of the infinite, but that in the infinite these are raised to a pre-eminent degree.

Donne undoubtedly accepted this principle of analogia entis almost uncritically, especially with his view of the nature of scripture, in which God is spoken of, not only analogically, but often in rather crass anthropomorphisms. Contemporary religious thought has not regarded this principle uncritically. There are at least three major ways of viewing this problem, represented by the views of Barth, Bultmann and Tillich.

Barth would agree with Donne in the practical realm of homiletics, though arriving by a different theological road. Barth rejects the analogia entis. For him, the problem of theological language is merely how the words of man can bring to expression the primary Word of God. This Word is Jesus, as he is witnessed to and revealed in the scripture and the kerygma. Barth cuts the Gordian knot by the simple affirmation that God confers on our language the capacity to speak about himself. He calls this the analogia gratiae. Language has no necessary, ontological quality of revelation, but receives this by an act of grace. Preaching participates in the divine act, and the preacher's words, though analogical, are authentic.<sup>12</sup>

Bultmann's well-known process of demythologizing has

---

<sup>12</sup>John Macquarrie, God-Talk (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 45-47.

serious implications for language about God. Bultmann has great difficulty in keeping from demythologizing God, since his existentialism demands that when we talk about God, we are telling only what he does to us. This is close to making God only the name for a factor in human existence. "The question of God and the question of myself are identical."<sup>13</sup>

However, Bultmann distinguishes the language of mythology and the language of analogy. Randolph contends that Bultmann defends analogical thinking as antithetical to mythological thinking.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps analogy links God and man without identifying them, sparing our statements about God from idolatry.

Paul Tillich attempts to bridge the gap between Barth and Bultmann by the language of being, a version of the traditional analogia entis. Tillich introduced symbolism as the category of statements about God, except for the non-symbolic statement, "God-Being-itself." Tillich finally changed even this statement and decided that the only non-symbolic statement about God is the declaration that everything we say about God is symbolic.<sup>15</sup> "Being"

---

<sup>13</sup>Rudolph Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), I, 5.

<sup>14</sup>Randolph, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup>Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (London: Nisbet, 1957), II, 10.

is for Tillich the bridging of the gap between ordinary talk and God-talk.

There is a plethora of discussions about religious language swirling around these representative views.<sup>16</sup> Our purpose, however, is more directly served by a look at present attitudes toward analogical and metaphorical language in preaching. This is the great strength of John Donne. How does this approach now fare among the homileticians? Not all will consider this a strength. It may be regarded as ostentation:

In the English Church, where such notables as John Donne and Jeremy Taylor justly gained a great reputation in the pulpit, this sermonic style took the form of the "witty" sermon, the point of which was to wring from the text every possible meaning. It was intended to impress its hearers and undoubtedly did those who came looking for this kind of oratory.<sup>17</sup>

Yet I think the majority would regard Donne's style as most effective.

There is a great enthusiasm today for pictorial and metaphorical speech. Some of this is particularized by an existential hermeneutic. When Randolph discusses "Confirmation" as the second

---

<sup>16</sup>In addition to works already cited, the following are just a few of the significant titles: Frederick Ferre, Language, Logic and God (New York: Harper & Row, 1961); Langdon Gilkey, Naming the Whirlwind (Indianapolis: Bobbs, Merrill, 1969); William Hordern, Speaking of God (New York: Macmillan, 1964); Dallas High (ed.), New Essays on Religious Language (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Ian Thomas Ramsey, Religious Language (London: SCM Press, 1957).

<sup>17</sup>Urban T. Holmes, The Future Shape of Ministry (New York: Seabury, 1971), p. 70.

ingredient of the homiletical process, he contends that this takes over the work elsewhere assigned to illustration. However, confirmation does not embellish the argument, it is the argument. Items available for this "confirmation" are parable, biography, autobiography, examples and authentication by existence. It is not difficult to marshal impressive support for this. Ebeling notes that "the parable is the form of the language of Jesus which corresponds to the incarnation."<sup>18</sup> Sittler comments: "It is the task of preaching to en flesh these categories (of theology) with the living episodic and anecdotal concreteness of historical and present eventfulness."<sup>19</sup> The appeal by Randolph extends to analogy, simile and metaphor, but this is only accommodation to the broadest definition of experience. Events are being asked for, because it is only in life that man is called to decision about life, and thus summoned into being.

Paul Scherer comes close to this: "I wonder, in fact, if we may not say that the illustration must not only illustrate the truth; it must itself be that truth."<sup>20</sup> Yet closer examination of his argument

---

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Robert W. Funk, "The Old Testament in Parable," Encounter, XXVI, No. 2 (Spring, 1965), 251.

<sup>19</sup>Joseph Sittler, The Ecology of Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), p. 36.

<sup>20</sup>Scherer, For We Have This Treasure, p. 185.

seems to reveal only an appeal for living and vibrant speech:

Third, my counsel would be to say what you have to say pictorially. Follow that through these letters of Paul sometime. I believe we can manage it. It can be done by exchanging the commonplace phrase, the torpid, sluggish word, for words that glow and move and have some being, those that lie down on the page with their four legs in the air, panting out for their life, for others that gird their loins to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint.<sup>21</sup>

This all bears a strong relationship to the whole matter of artistry. Buttrick observes that preaching is both an art and a craft.<sup>22</sup> The religious man, especially the preacher, and the artist have a great deal in common. They share a special insight into the nature of things. For the artist, the overarching reality is beauty. For the preacher, that reality is God.

Creative art combines expression and communication. The artist perhaps is saying: "I have found something that I cannot tell you about in words--and yet that I cannot keep silent about; I want you to find it too."<sup>23</sup>

The artistic expression for the preacher is by the symbol of words. It is Heidegger who raises speech to such great symbolic significance, for he makes language prior to thought, calling us to response. This is the "language-event" of Fuchs and Ebeling. Proclamation is

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>22</sup>Buttrick, p. 145.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas McPherson, "Assertion and Analogy," in High, p. 209.

Fuchs and Ebeling. Proclamation is therefore more like answering, for the preacher and the hearer stand together listening. Thor Hall is so impressed with this artistic expression as centered in the subject that he puts forward a most provocative suggestion. Since language is really not objective but existential, can it be that glossalalia is really the equivalent in language-artistry of the Darmstadt school in music or the contemporary abstractionist in art?<sup>24</sup>

But this is to digress from the poetic, artistic quality of great preaching, Randolph considers poetry as the foremost of forms which best share the intention and mood of many texts, and he suggests five characteristics of such preaching: (1) sensitive to the rhythms of speech; (2) concrete in its imagery, not vague or flowery; (3) structured according to its function; (4) aware of the connotation of words; (5) does not so much state a thesis as create an effect. It is interesting to note that he cites Paul Scherer as his prime example of this kind of preaching.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Thor Hall, "A New Syntax for Religious Language," Theology Today, XXIV (July, 1967), 178.

<sup>25</sup>Randolph, op. cit., p. 178.

### A Comparison

In order to think of Donne and contemporary preaching, one further task might well be undertaken. We can look at the sermonizing of a contemporary, both in the style of Donne and in a sermon on a text which Donne also used. The extended metaphor is admirably represented by the following sermon of George Buttrick, of which I now give a precis:

#### "Lonely Voyage"<sup>26</sup>

The life of the cosmos, no port of departure or port of arrival, every passenger is buried in the deep. A lonely voyage. When we confront that fact, biblical faith begins.

I. It is a ship, not a rock. On board we build our securities--personal, by hospital plans and Red Cross; commercial, by cash and prestige; national by law and order and defenses.

Some paint the portholes and refuse to walk on deck, but we know there is a beyond.

There are passengers who say, "There is only life on shipboard," but these do not add to the vessel's peace. Wise men walk the deck, ask their questions about departure and arrival, wonder who chartered the ship, and ponder the meaning of sea and sky.

II. What happens when a man looks and walks? He may leap from the ship. Or he may slowly die, hating the vessel, himself and the passengers.

He may retreat into the fascinating life on shipboard: as philosopher, businessman, artist or scientist.

He may live in agnostic and stoic courage.

---

<sup>26</sup>George Buttrick, Sermons Preached in a University Chapel (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), pp. 13-19.



III. Is nothing else to be said? Men pray, and pray harder when the vessel is tempest tossed. Why? Is it that God prays in them?

Prayer-fact leads to God-fact: Men who pray have learned to say "God" and have declared themselves found of God. They say that around the sea and ship and sky are everlasting arms and above it all, a Face.

One man in particular spoke and lived thus. He informs us that the Mystery out there and in us is One, who loves all, and so we should love him and our neighbors and ourselves in him. He walked the plank, and the sign of the plank has been set everywhere in the vessel since that day.

IV. Anything else? This is a risk. We cannot live only for the ship plus breath. Every man is buried at sea. The real issue is the nature of the deep. People who live at risk find a security, hardly knowing why.

Underneath are those arms. Don't paint out the porthole. You will see its outline and know there is a Beyond and a Within. Meanwhile, the ship plunges on.

This summary conveys something of the power of a metaphor-sermon. Our examination of Donne's metaphors revealed an extensive use of figures classified "Life as a Journey."<sup>27</sup> Donne never, as far as I know, preached a sermon in which such a figure was made the entire framework, but he certainly used biblical figures as his text and preached the entire sermon on them. In contrast, Buttrick uses the text, Ps. 107:23, "Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters," only in the heading for the sermon. There is no mention of it in the sermon proper. In fact, it applies only obliquely. He does introduce and use his other text toward the end of the sermon, Deut. 33:27. "The

---

<sup>27</sup>See above, p. 139.

eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

This sermon of Buttrick's is also characterized by a departure from normal "points" and the organization of an outline. Buttrick does divide his sermon into four sections. It is probable that one would mark these divisions as he did, yet it would be difficult to give each a heading. The sermon clusters its ideas around the spinning out of the sea-voyage figure. The same approach is noted for Paul Scherer and his sermon, "On the Moving Edge of Time." Stidger calls these "symphonic sermons."<sup>28</sup> The effect is partly produced by the recurring theme or motif. For Scherer it was the text, "Samuel took a stone." For Buttrick it is the returning figure of the ship, and one is reminded of Donne's phrase, "Life is a Sea."

An interesting point of departure from which to look at Donne and a contemporary "poetic" preacher is to examine the use of the same text by both men. This proved more difficult than might be expected. The collected works of any preacher tend to be rather specialized. However, Buttrick and Donne both have sermons on I Cor. 13:12-13: "Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face

---

<sup>28</sup>William Stidger, Symphonic Sermons (New York: Long and Smith, 1924).

to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know, even as also I am known. "

Donne's sermon (preached in St. Paul's for Easter, 1628, VIII, No. 9) is a masterpiece of his developed style. He deals most thoroughly with the two parts of his text, the now and then, and our experience of sight and knowledge. For now, our sight of God is in the Theater of the world, the glass is the Book of the Creatures and the light by which we see him is natural reason. Now our knowledge of God, our Academy, our University is the Church, our medium is the Ordinance of God, preaching and sacraments, and our light is the light of faith.

Then, our sight of God will be in heaven, the medium his own revelation, and the light, the light of glory. Then, our knowledge of God will be in God; he himself will be the medium as well as the light by which we know him.

Donne plunges into all the ramifications of the text and calls upon the opinions of the Fathers and the Schoolmen. His discussion is long (639 lines) and involved. It concentrates on a believing congregation, and speaks from faith to faith. It offers relief to the listener in recurring flashes of brilliance, either in the spell of language, the bright use of metaphor, or sheer imaginative application and description. Consider this brief passage:

There is not so poor a creature but may be thy glass to see God in. The greatest flat glass that can be made cannot represent anything greater than it is. If every gnat that flies were an Archangel, all that could tell me, that there is a God; and the poorest worm that creeps tells me that. If I should ask the Basilisk, how camest thou by those killing eyes, he would tell me, Thy God made me so. And if I should ask the Slow-worm, how camest thou to be without eyes, he would tell me, Thy God made me so. The cedar is no better a Glass to see God in than the hyssop on the wall; all things that are, are equally removed from nothing, and whatsoever hath any being, is by that very being, a glass in which we see God, who is the Root, the Fountain of all being. (VIII, 224)

Buttrick in his sermon stays with the "now."<sup>29</sup> He is preaching to a University chapel and is wrestling with his hearers for the principle of faith. He is pleading a healthy agnosticism, but an even healthier trust. We do not see or know except in riddles and distortions, but we do see and we do know. This knowledge is nurtured in faith, hope and love. Buttrick begins with confessed agnosticism about our world, ourselves, our neighbors and our God. Then he distinguishes biblical and secular agnosticism. We do see, and we do know that our knowledge is partial. And we must trade on that partial sight and knowledge. The upshot is faith, living as a person faced by Jesus Christ. It is hope, and it is love.

It is difficult to compare this sermon to Donne. It is brief (approximately 260 lines) and it is evangelistic. It is therefore far more hearer-centered. Donne concentrates on the text and moves

---

<sup>29</sup>Buttrick, Sermons Preached . . ., pp. 139-206.

toward the beatific vision. Buttrick concentrates on the sceptical collegian and refers only briefly and finally to the ultimate fulfillment of heaven. Donne uses the Fathers and Schoolmen, Buttrick uses significant sources: LeGallienne, Sartre, Camus, Carlyle, Kant, Santayana, Barth, Galileo, Einstein, John Franklin. These sources are intended to sway the academician. Buttrick stands in the University and points his hearer to the community of faith. Donne stands in the community of faith and points to heaven. Yet each uses the scripture, figures and sources in equally appropriate and comparable ways.

This is to say that there is really more of comparison than contrast in the work of these two divines. That kind of poetic insight which keeps Donne from pedantry is realized again in the sparkling figures and creative applications of a George Buttrick.

## CONCLUSION

What is the force of this analysis on preaching of the twentieth century? As in all such studies, the preferences and prejudices of the observer are inextricably a part of the question. Preaching has its perennial detractors, and it is constantly being reshaped by its particular culture. There is no good evidence that it will not survive. It seems to keep rising from the ashes of its supposed demise for new flights of meaning and usefulness.

Part of the response to a study of Donne is simple appreciation for the value of diligence harnessed to a creative spirit.

Donne came later to the task of preaching. Sixteen years is a brief time in the pulpit, and Donne made his mark in unexpected rapidity. Had health been his, the miter would have been on his head and his influence would have been even greater. Nor would his preaching have declined. The material of his sermons seems to retain the air of freshness and power throughout his career.

What more is to be said beyond appreciation? It is obvious that respect for his position and accomplishment does not mean agreement with his style. Another Dean of St. Paul's confessed astonishment that Donne had enjoyed such success as a preacher.

Dr. Henry Hart Milman, writing a century ago, found it difficult to imagine how people could have listened to Donne "not only with patience but with absorbed interest, with unflagging attention, even with delight and rapture, to those interminable disquisitions, to us teeming with laboured obscurity, false and misplaced with fatiguing antithesis."<sup>1</sup> Recent critics, Eliot to the contrary, do not share this pessimistic view of the sermons. Yet even at this point, preaching is never properly evaluated merely upon literary style, since this is not ultimately its objective. If preaching is an art, which I most definitely believe, then it is unique among the arts in the criterion for its success, for what else is caught up in the total response of its recipient like preaching? The poet, painter, sculptor, musician, is giving birth to that which is congruent to himself, authentically his own, hopefully to evoke a response within the recipient appropriate to the feelings and ideas of the artist. Indeed, if there is no response, the authenticity is suspect, along with the gift. Yet, the response is not intrinsically part of the event, or, to put it more precisely, artistic response does not operate at the same level as response to preaching. This is what is involved in saying that preaching is sacramental, and how does one measure

---

<sup>1</sup>Henry Hart Milman, Annals of St. Paul's Cathedral (London: John Murray, 1868), p. 328.

this? Did people repent when Donne asked them to do so? Did they respond in faith to his good news and strive for obedience?

One may demur at this line of reasoning and cite scriptural illustration of unsuccessful preaching that was faithfully and properly given. Yet this is the kind of criteria unavailable to us in evaluating Donne. No one would want to venture what God thought of Donne's preaching.

So we are left to other canons. If it is accepted that great preaching is biblical, grounding itself in the exposition of texts, then Donne is a great preacher. If it is accepted that preaching demands the self-giving of the preacher, that it is "truth through personality," and that the personal experiences and responses of the preacher, kept in proportion, are an aid to understanding, Donne is a great preacher. If it is accepted that obedient language, creatively styled and imaginatively formed, is an effective tool if not a necessity for preaching, then Donne is a great preacher.

It seems to me of importance to see Donne as a pioneer in the subtle change of metaphor as he used it to make clear abstract ideas. As a poet, Donne was constantly attempting to communicate the concrete experience itself, and not merely the results of his reflection upon the experience. Yet in this communication he finds intellectual imagery to be valid as a means of mediating religious



experience. This says a great deal to the preacher who constantly wrestles with the ways by which the abstract ideas of theology and the Christian faith can be made intelligible and meaningful to the listener. It is often assumed that the only way to convey a rather complex thought is by a radical simplification. Donne often illustrates the complex with the equally or more complex.

There is no lack of voices to speak of Donne's prowess. Whatever the mysterious quality of spiritual force may have contributed to his effectiveness, there was in Donne the felicitous joining of direct, applicable, scriptural principle and living, dynamic language. He was a man of words and the Word. In that he was, both what he said and how he said it are instructive to the preacher today. It is a rare kind of dedicated genius that could pen, "Hymn to God my God, in my sickness,"

Since I am comming to that Holy roome,  
 Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,  
 I shall be made thy Musique; As I come  
 I tune the Instrument here at the dore,  
 And what I must doe then, thinke here before.

While my Physitians by their love are growne  
 Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie  
 Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne  
 That this is my South-west discoverie  
Per fretum febris, by these streights to die.

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;  
 For, though their currants yeeld returns to none,  
 What shall my West hurt me? As West and East  
 In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,  
 So death doth touch the Resurrection.

Is the Pacifique Sea my home? Or are  
 The Easterne riches? Is Jerusalem?  
 Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltare,  
 All streights, and none but streights, are wayes to them,  
 Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Sem.

We thinke that Paradise and Calvarie,  
 Christs Crosse, and Adams tree, stood in one place;  
 Looke Lord, and finde both Adams met in me;  
 As the first Adams sweat surrounds my face.  
 May the last Adams blood my soule embrace.

So, in his purple wrapp'd receive mee Lord,  
 By these his thornes give me his other Crowne;  
 And as to others soules I preach'd the word,  
 Be this my Text, my Sermon to mine owne,  
 Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

Donne, John

The Works of John Donne, D.D., ed. by Henry Alford. 6 Vols.  
London: Parker, 1839.

Biathanatos. New York: Facsimile Text Society, 1930.

Divine Poems, ed. by Helen Gardner. Oxford: Clarendon  
Press, 1966.

The Poems of John Donne, ed. by H. J. C. Grierson. London:  
Oxford University Press, 1964.

Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. by John Hayward.  
London: Nonesuch Press, 1929.

Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters, ed. by W. Milgate.  
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

Essays in Divinity, ed. by Evelyn M. Simpson. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press, 1952.

The Sermons of John Donne, ed. by Evelyn M. Simpson and  
George R. Potter. 10 Vols. Berkeley: University of  
California Press, 1953.

Donne's Sermons (Selected Passages), ed. by Logan Persall  
Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920.

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, ed. by John Sparrow.  
Cambridge, Eng: The University Press, 1923.

## Articles

- Allen, Don Cameron. "Dean Donne Sets His Text," Journal of English Literary History, X (September, 1943), 208-229.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Donne and the Ship Metaphor," Modern Language Review, LXXVI (1961), 306-312.
- Augustinius, Aurelius. Writings of St. Augustine (The Fathers of the Church, 4). New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947.
- Eliot, T. S. "The Metaphysical Poets," Times Literary Supplement (October 20, 1921), 669-470.
- Garrod, W. A. "The Date of Donne's Birth," Times Literary Supplement (December 30, 1944), 636.
- Grierson, H. J. C. "John Donne and the Via Media," Modern Language Review, XLIII (1948), 305-314.
- Hall, Thor. "A New Syntax for Religious Language," Theology Today, XXIV (July, 1967), 172-184.
- Lewis, C. S. "Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century," in Seventeenth-Century Studies presented to Sir Herbert Grierson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938, 127-146.
- Lewis, E. G. "The Question of Toleration in the Works of John Donne," Modern Language Review, XXXIII (April, 1938), 255-258.
- Martz, Louis L. "John Donne in Meditation: 'The Anniversaries,'" Journal of English Literary History, XIV (December, 1947), 247-273.
- Mazzeo, J. A. "A Seventeenth-Century Theory of Metaphysical Poetry," Modern Philology, I (1952), 25-32.
- Milgate, W. "The Date of Donne's Birth," Notes and Queries, CXCI (November 16, 1946), 206-208.
- Ong, Walter J. "Wit and Mystery: A Revaluation in Medieval Latin Hymnody," Speculum, XXII (July, 1947), 337.

Potter, George R. "John Donne, Poet to Priest," in Five Gayley Lectures, 1947-1954 (University of California Publications, English Studies, 10). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955.

Shapiro, I. A. "Donne's Birthdate," Notes and Queries, CXC VII (July 19, 1952), 310-313.

\_\_\_\_\_. "John Donne and Lincoln's Inn, 1591-1594," Times Literary Supplement (October 16, 1930), 833, and (October 23, 1930), 861.

Simpson, Evelyn. "The Biographical Value of Donne's Sermons," Review of English Studies, II (1951), 339-357.

Sparrow, John. "Two Epitaphs by John Donne," Times Literary Supplement (March 26, 1949), 208.

\_\_\_\_\_. "John Donne and Contemporary Preachers," in Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association. Oxford: Clarendon Press, XVI (1930), 144-178.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Wit of John Donne," Theology, XXII (March, 1931), 144-154.

Synons, Arthur. "John Donne," Fortnightly Review, n. s., LXVI (1899), 734-735.

Warren, Austin. "The Very Rev. Dr. Donne," Kenyon Review, XVI (Spring, 1954), 276.

Wilson, F. P. "Notes on the Early Life of John Donne," Review of English Studies, III (July, 1927), 276-278.

#### Books

Abrams, M. H. (ed.). The Norton Anthology of English Literature, I. New York: Norton, 1968.

Alvarez, Alfred. The School of Donne. New York: Pantheon Books, 1962.

- Auden, W. H. The Dyer's Hand. New York: Random House, 1962.
- Baker, Richard. A Chronicle of the Kings of England. 4th ed. London: E. Cotes, 1665.
- Bald, R. C. Donne and the Drurys. Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1959.
- \_\_\_\_\_. John Donne: A Life. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Bennett, Joan. Four Metaphysical Poets. Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1934.
- Bultmann, Rudolph. Jesus Christ and Mythology. New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1958.
- Buttrick, George A. Jesus Came Preaching. New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1931.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Sermons Preached in a University Chapel. Charles Scribners' Sons, 1959.
- Coffin, Charles Monroe. John Donne and the New Philosophy. New York: Columbia University Press, 1937. New York: Humanities Press, 1953.
- Combs, Homer Carroll. A Concordance to the English Poems of John Donne. Chicago: Packard, 1940.
- Dark, Sydney. Five Deans. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928.
- Dryden, John. Essays of John Dryden, ed. by W. P. Ker. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900.
- Ebeling, Gerhard. Word and Faith. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963.
- Eliot, T. S. Selected Essays, 1917-1932. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938.
- Fausset, Hugh. John Donne, a Study in Discord. London: Cayse, 1924.

- Gardner, Helen Louise (ed.). John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Business of Criticism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Gill, Theodore. The Sermons of John Donne. New York: Meridian Books, 1958.
- Gosse, Edmund. The Life and Letters of John Donne. 2 Vols. London: Heinemann, 1899.
- Gransden, Karl W. John Donne. London: Longmans, Green, 1954.
- Grierson, H. J. C. Criticism and Creation. London: Chatlo and Windus, 1949.
- Hardy, Evelyn. Donne, a Spirit in Conflict. London: Constable, 1942.
- Holmes, Urban T. The Future Shape of Ministry. New York: Seabury, 1971.
- Hughes, Richard E. The Progress of the Soul. New York: Morrow, 1968.
- Husain, Itrat. Dogmatic and Mystical Theology of John Donne. London: Macmillan, 1938.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Mystical Element in the Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1948.
- Jessopp, Augustus. The Life of John Donne. London: Methuen, 1905.
- Kermode, Frank (ed.). Discussions of John Donne. Boston: Heath, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. John Donne. London: Longmans, Green, 1957.
- Keynes, Geoffrey. A Bibliography of John Donne. Cambridge, Eng: Cambridge University Press, 1958.



- Lampe, G. W. H. The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers. London: Mowbray, 1951.
- Legouis, Pierre. Donne the Craftsman. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962.
- Leishman, J. B. The Metaphysical Poets. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Monarch of Wit. London: Hutchison University Library, 1951.
- Macquarrie, John. God-Talk. London: SCM Press, 1967.
- Martz, Louis L. The Poetry of Meditation. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954.
- Michalson, Carl. The Hinge of History. New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1959.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Rationality of Faith. New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1963.
- Mitchell, W. Frazer. English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962.
- Moloney, Michael Francis. John Donne, His Flight from Medievalism. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944.
- Mueller, Janel M. Donne's Prebend Sermons. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- Mueller, William. John Donne, Preacher. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962.
- Ramsay, Mary Paton. Les doctrines médiévales chez Donne. London: Oxford University Press, 1924.
- Randolph, David James. The Renewal of Preaching. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969.
- Rugoff, Milton Allan. Donne's Imagery: A Study in Creative Sources. New York: Corporate Press, 1939.

- Scherer, Paul. For We Have This Treasure. New York: Harper and Row, 1944.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Word God Sent. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.
- Schleiner, Winfried. The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons. Providence: Brown University Press, 1970.
- Sharp, R. L. From Donne to Dryden: The Revolt Against Metaphysical Poetry. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940.
- Simpson, Evelyn M. A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924.
- Sittler, Joseph. The Ecology of Faith. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961.
- Spencer, Theodore (ed.). A Garland for John Donne. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931.
- Tillich, Paul. Systematic Theology. 2 Vols. London: Nisbet, 1957.
- Tuve, Rosemond. Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Allergorical Imagery. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966.
- Tyndale, William. Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures. London: Parker, 1848.
- Underhill, Evelyn. Mysticism. London: Methuen, 1911.
- Unger, Leonard. Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism. Chicago: Regnery, 1950.
- Walton, Izaak. Lives. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927.
- Webber, Joan. Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963.

- Whitaker, William. A Disputation on Holy Scripture. London: Parker, 1849.
- White, Helen C. The Metaphysical Poets, A Study in Religious Experience. New York: Macmillan, 1956.
- White, William. John Donne Since 1900: A Bibliography of Periodical Articles. Boston: n. p., 1942.
- Williams, Mary Ellen. "John Donne's Orbe of Man . . . Inexplicable Mystery." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1964.
- Williamson, George. The Proper Wit of Poetry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.